

Introduction to disaster prevention: doing it differently by rethinking the nature of knowledge and learning

This issue calls for rethinking sources of knowledge and learning for disaster prevention. It focuses on practitioners engaged in disaster risk reduction at local level, presenting an action research programme dedicated to strengthening knowledge and learning from practice.

It is in the nature of the disaster prevention “industry” and the wider development industry in which it nests that much learning is “top down” in nature, based on formal and institutional studies and frameworks such as the Sendai framework for action on disaster risk reduction (UNISDR, 2015a). These tend to focus on larger-scale intensive events; however, disaster prevention is concerned with a wide spectrum of hazards and increasing evidence demonstrates that many disasters which impact lives and livelihoods are small-scale and recurrent “everyday disasters”. The GNDR’s (2017) “Frontline” programme gathered evidence from over 14,000 local-level respondents who demonstrated the prevalence of diverse, small-scale “threats” and their consequences, examined in Gibson and Wisner (2016). UNISDR’s GAR 2013 and 2015 similarly highlighted the substantial impact of attritional “extensive disasters” on lives and livelihoods (UNISDR, 2013, 2015b).

Invaluable experience and knowledge of such disasters is held almost uniquely at local level reflecting the ways that local people confront diverse, context-specific, small-scale, unpublicised “everyday disasters” alongside better-publicised intensive events. Such events – often configured by dynamically changing social, political, economic and environmental conditions – underwrite the increasing importance of sharing knowledge between local and non-local stakeholders to better understand and address existing and new challenges for a safer and sustainable future. At the same time, relatively little learning and knowledge sharing is generated amongst local-level practitioners and communities who are typically activists and have limited opportunities to reflect, think critically, capture and record learning or share it peer to peer (Gibson, 2015).

This issue builds on Gibson and Wisner (2016) to investigate qualitatively, through the eyes of local-level practitioners, mechanisms of knowledge and learning which can add to our understanding of disaster prevention. It is founded on the premise that the shared goal of secure lives and livelihoods can only be achieved where knowledge and expertise derived from local-level action is respected, shared and mobilised alongside other sources.

The contributions that follow here suggest that knowledge itself has to be understood differently and so, too, does the process of learning. This can lead to a greater mutual understanding of both one’s own perceptions and those of others, each with their own values and justifications.

As the preparation of this special edition has unfolded, it has changed shape. The initial intention was to gather and compare a set of case studies linked to involvement in “Frontline”. Through collaboration between all contributors and the opportunity to work together face to face in this learning journey, an iterative learning process developed, which expanded learning from the original case studies.

The overall programme

Eight local NGOs, previously involved in Global Network for Disaster Reduction’s (GNDR) Frontline programme, contributed initial accounts of particular case studies of local-level

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learning, action and barriers towards improving disaster prevention. They mutually analysed each other's case studies using a common framework and shared their analysis with all participants. Cases were exchanged between participants for peer review. These reviews formed the focus of a meeting of the contributors and editors of this journal in Kathmandu, Nepal, in October 2017 at which the findings and learning from each case study and from comparison between them were discussed and recorded[1]. These discussions were then analysed generating comparative learning based on the eight cases and the insights of the participants. The method, the cases, group discussions, analysis and final discussion are presented in this issue, which also includes three cases offered by external contributors.

The process

As noted above, local-level practitioners in disaster reduction and development are typically activists and as such often have limited time for reflection, critical thinking and learning based on their work. They are also often relatively isolated from other practitioners facing similar concerns, which reduces further the possibility of learning and knowledge creation. The Kathmandu workshop challenged participating practitioners to think critically about their own work, to also consider the work of their peers and to apply their experience and insights to the body of case studies they had created, with the goal of generating learning which might improve their action, as well as addressing underlying risk factors beyond local level. The process, which evolved during the programme of work, reflects a transition from "first-order" learning – following an established process, through "second-order" learning – adapting the process to "third-order" learning – learning how to learn from action and as a result to generate new modes of action (Argyris and Schon, 1974).

Overview of articles in this issue

"Views from the Frontline and Frontline methodology: critical reflection on theory and practice" considers GNDR's "Frontline" and its companion programmes which formed the basis for the case studies presented below. It examines the organisational structure, data gathering, analysis and data representation methods. It discusses the application of findings at local, national and international level, and draws together the challenges and questions emerging from the "Frontline" method and data.

"Developing the CSO case studies" outlines the participative and iterative process through which this journal issue was co-authored, focusing particularly on the development of the following case study papers through several cycles of editing and peer reviews culminating in a group workshop. It suggests that this process might form the basis for other collaborative action learning exercises.

Case studies

"Traditional Kiribati beliefs about environmental issues and impacts on communities" examines the convergence of traditional knowledge and practices with new ideas and information as the islanders address the environmental, social and economic impacts of climate change, finding that partnerships and collaboration are a basis for progress.

"Advancing small island resilience and inclusive development through a convergence strategy in Carles, Philippines" examines an initiative to promote multi-stakeholder collaboration, addressing the risks faced by the islanders through participative risk assessments, capacity building and actions to strengthen the resilience of the islanders.

"Waiting for politics at the mercy of river: case study of an enduring community" focuses on risks faced by riverside communities beside the Indus river, South Punjab, Pakistan, highlighting issues of power, powerless and lack of political voice among marginalised communities and the scope for building coalitions to press for action through local advocacy and campaigning.

“Social and economic inequality limits disaster prevention amongst the most vulnerable in Vietnam” reflects on experience of DRR work in central Vietnam, arguing that DRR must focus on the vulnerability of specific groups, and on the particular risks they face, rather than being framed by global or national policies. This depends on knowledge of these contexts being considered in national to local DRR planning and implementation.

“Tackling everyday risks through climate adaptive organic farming” considers strategies to improve farming in a region exposed to increased risk of drought and crop failure by climate change, showing that approaches have to understand specific environmental contexts, and must also engage culturally with the local communities to ensure success.

“Citizens of Delhi lead resilience action” is set in a densely populated urban area where large informal settlements have developed as a result of inward migration, leading to increasing risk resulting from poor services, infrastructure and sanitation. It describes the establishment of citizen forums to develop bottom-up political pressure for provision of services.

“Enhancing resilience against floods in the Lower Motowoh community, Limbe, Southwest Cameroon” considers disaster risk reduction in the context of limited national and local government capacity. The Frontline process identified priority threats including traffic accidents, seasonal flooding and a local community action programme focused on reducing the incidence of flooding.

“Enhancing earthquake resilience of communities: an action by women’s group in Nepal” focuses on an initiative to mobilise women in addressing impacts of small scale earthquake events through “non-structural mitigation” measures. In doing so the programme empowered women and transformed social perceptions.

“Drawing the case studies together: synthesis of case studies and group discussions” considers the case studies comparatively, drawing on detailed records of the workshop discussion between the contributors, identifying themes emerging from the individual cases and the comparative discussions.

External companion case studies were invited to complement findings from the above cases:

- “Making communities disaster resilient: challenges and prospects for community engagement in Nepal” addresses the questions: to what extent existing disaster policies in Nepal support and enable disaster resilience of communities? And what challenges and prospects do the communities have in responding to disaster risk for making communities resilient? based on field work among communities affected by the 2015 Gorkha earthquake.
- “The power of localism during the long-term disaster recovery process” examines the nature of localism in post-disaster reconstruction, taking the case of flooding in a Brazilian town and highlighting the necessity for understanding and dialogue to harmonise local capacities and local culture with external interventions through emergency services.
- “Local responses to disasters: recent lessons from zero-order responders” discusses the nature of local, immediate and innovative responses to disasters by local populations, arguing that these innate capacities should be recognised alongside those of external “first responders”.

“Local voices and action: concluding discussion” establishes a theoretical framework for discussion of the findings presented in the issue. It highlights the nature of “everyday politics” as an integral aspect of local action and collaboration, and identifies “legitimate subversion” as a strategy employed in different cases to achieve influence at local and other levels to address underlying risk factors.

Doing it differently by rethinking the nature of knowledge and learning?

The key findings, explored in detail in the following papers, concern the process by which knowledge has been created, and the knowledge created through the process. First, the process emphasises the value of creating time and space for critical reflection on action, a process which emerged from the collaboration of the participants. We suggest that such time and space is too often lacking and that the consequent failure of practitioners to bring local-level learning into the DRR discourse is, in part, a consequence of this dogged activism. Second, they concern the knowledge which is created (or re-created, we do not claim originality for many of the ideas discussed in this issue, nevertheless they demand restating and reframing as they are often unheard) which suggests that the nature of complex and diverse “everyday disasters” represents a body of understanding held at local level, that local capacities are poorly understood and often not harmonised with external interventions, that the role of local partnerships and collaborations in creating a legitimate political voice is undervalued and that local civil society actors often seek to strengthen this as a means of influencing underlying risk factors.

The authors feel that both the findings from the cases presented in this issue, and the process through which learning was generated offer insights into how learning from local action can contribute to wider understanding at all scales of disaster prevention.

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