The power of localism during the long-term disaster recovery process

Victor Marchezini
Department of Research and Development,
CEMADEN – National Early Warning and Monitoring Centre of Natural Disaster,
São José dos Campos, Brazil

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to analyze some barriers and the “drivers of localism” during the long-term disaster recovery process. The main question is: what types of discourses and practices about localism are being heard and revealed in the frontline?

Design/methodology/approach – Fieldwork, which was conducted from January 2010 to June 2013, consisted of participant observation and qualitative data collection. The authors opted for an approach that privileges narrative and observation, dialoguing with participants to gather local knowledge and information. Data were analyzed in light of the disaster recovery literature, focusing on disaster recovery as an expression of power relations.

Findings – Localism has been framed in diverse ways according to the interests of social groups placed in contextual meanings and, sometimes, in different phases of risk and disaster management. One important driver of localism is disaster narrative framing that allowed identification of how localism is composed, by whom and how.

Research limitations/implications – One important aspect that needs further research is longitudinal studies to investigate how the barriers are changing between the generations, and how intergenerational dialogues can be promoted to sustain long-term participation and localism.

Originality/value – This study recommends the need to identify who is talking about the importance of local and how localism has been framed in policy and action. It is important to empower localism in order to provide ways for local people sharing what is going on in the frontline. But it is also essential to provide funding and means of implementation for local initiatives regarding advocating, researching and proposing disaster recovery interventions led by people.

Keywords Localism, Resistance, Disaster recovery, Social science, Disaster framing

Paper type Research paper

[...] Now we are fighting fiercely, claw and faith
Together with the little that there is, to put the city back on its feet [...] 
The smile hides the tears, the tight heart
But luizense are strong, they bring the origins of the past [...] 
Our culture is alive; the water did not carry it away [...] 
People’s kindness, this the flood did not remove [...] 
Our city is enchanted, still has much beauty (Virgílio, D. (2010), Poema da Enchente (Flood Poem), São Luiz do Paraitinga, SP, Brazil. Permission was granted for the author to translate the poem into English).

1. “Were voices really being heard?”
This important question was posed in the article “Let’s talk about you” (Gibson and Wisner, 2016), and finds an echo in the context of São Luiz do Paraitinga town, São Paulo
state, Brazil, where the voices of local residents – luizenses – were evoked in the flood poem cited above[1]. The town experienced extensive floods in 1863, 1967, 1971 and 1996. But the worst case occurred in January 2010, when the Paraitinga River reached 12 m above its normal level, submerging nearly 80 percent of its urban area, including the entire historical center of the town, and half of the luizenses (5,000 persons) were made homeless. Several external governmental agencies and different social actors were present in São Luiz. These included external governmental agencies from the federal level (the Army, National Historical and Artistic Heritage Institute-IPHAN) and from the state of São Paulo (Civil Defense, Military Fire Department, São Paulo Council of Cultural Heritage – CONDEPHAAT, Secretariat for Habitation). The different social actors included officers, journalists, tourists, experts and volunteers. The external social actors interacted with the locals, trying to impose their ideas, rules and techniques, and therefore marginalizing locals’ perspectives.

Long-term listening to what is going on in the frontline of disasters’ aftermath is important to avoid social abandonment and protracted crisis (Breunlin and Regis, 2006; Barrios, 2014; Zhang, 2016). In São Luiz do Paraitinga, at the beginning of January 2010, I began to follow the disaster not as a natural event but as a process (Hewitt, 1983; Lavell, 1993), adopting a concept of disaster that is focused on the social experiences that take place in a social time frame (Oliver-Smith, 1998). Fieldwork, which was conducted from January 2010 to June 2013, exceeded the emergency phase, and did not represent the time-line of disaster recovery period. I visited the temporary houses of the luizenses and conducted semi-structured interviews with 50 participants (1 percent of the 5,000 affected people), including men and women, young and elderly, who were selected using convenience sampling methods. I opted for an approach that privileges narrative and observation, dialoguing with participants to gather local knowledge and information (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman, 2002; Freire, 2005). I analyzed qualitative data in light of the disaster recovery literature, focusing on disaster recovery as an expression of power relations embodied in discourses and practices that are catalyzed by social actors gathered in the local disaster scenario (Adams et al., 2009; Barrios, 2010; Brodine, 2011).

This paper complements some previous works related to the identity of luizenses and their expressions of cultural resistance in the disasters’ aftermath (Marchezini, 2015a), where power dynamics, discourses and practices of biopolitics of disaster take place (Marchezini, 2015b).

In this paper, I share some findings related to the barriers and the “drivers of localism” during the long-term disaster recovery process of São Luiz do Paraitinga. Localism can be framed as citizens having the right and the ability to challenge their political and economic leaders, about the decentralization of power and responsibility to frontline public service staff, service users, smaller local organizations and local business (Padley, 2013).

Localism can also be conceived as a “discursive boundary object” (Dunbar-Hester, 2013), sufficiently malleable to accommodate different institutional and interpretative perspectives, but also sufficiently robust to maintain an identity across these boundaries (Star, 2010). The main question is: what types of discourses and practices about localism are being heard and revealed in the frontline?

Section 2 explores some barriers that the community faced during the different phases of a disaster: from the emergency phase to long-term recovery.

Section 3 discusses these findings in the light of other “drivers of localism” in Latin America.

Finally, we conclude that local community, practitioners, researchers and policymakers must build a dialogue-oriented nexus approach to reduce some barriers, improving long-term efforts to promote and sustain bridging values such as citizen science, action research and citizen-science-policy interface.
2. Barriers to... and drivers of localism

During the long-term disaster recovery process of São Luiz, several discourses and practices expressed the conflicts and barriers between the locals and the “outsiders,” but there were also discourses and practices that help luizenses to resist and cope with day-to-day stresses. However, different social groups responded differently to the long-term disaster recovery and to the possibilities of being luizense. Some examples can highlight these social dynamics.

2.1 Who are the heroes? Framing local (in)capacity during emergency rescues

Disasters can attract media coverage during the emergency phase or be neglected by them. Disaster narratives tend to reinforce hegemonic forces of society, so the construction of “disaster” through semantics and numerology is highly political (Wisner and Gaillard, 2009; Kondo et al., 2011; Button, 2012). The way public and private institutions, media and other social actors define and frame the disaster is important because definitions orient practices and policies. They define what are classified as “social problems” and shape the solutions fabricated by institutions to solve them (Dombrowsky, 1998). Numbers, words and images matter in the field of cognitive battles and the warriors do not have the same quantity and forms of capital for the making of social reality (Bourdieu, 1991).

In São Luiz do Paraitinga, the external media came to the city and produced a disaster narrative that highlighted the activities of external governmental agencies. Categories and target populations were established. The locals were classified by the external agencies as helpless victims, homeless, incapable and vulnerable people who needed to be rescued by external heroes (Marchezini, 2015b). Alongside the disaster narrative episodes, discourses of expert knowledge – geologists and civil protection agents – circulated, emphasizing the logic of victimization of local people and inspiring dramatic speeches. The Army and Military Firefighters were represented as heroes, emphasizing the amount of material and human resources used – the numbers of soldiers, boats and helicopters. This interesting game of numbers also counted people rescued and provided immediate data for media coverage. Everything was framed as “under control,” thanks to external actions. As Agência Brasil (2010, p. 4) reported on January 4, 2010: “[…] 300 civil defense professionals, firefighters, military police officers, health workers, and geologists are in the Paraíba Valley, helping the locals affected by the rains. Until yesterday, the government said 3,520 people had been rescued by the fire department.”

The testimonies of the local people in the scene are selected, and information is ordered in time, producing a narrative that guides what is said about the disaster, identifying heroes and victims who enter the scene and how they act. However, there are other local discourses and practices that do not appear in the official storyline, and can become visible when the locals, who hold other interpretations of the disaster narrative, are listened to (Breunlin and Regis, 2006; Barrios, 2014). In São Luiz do Paraitinga, over several days the local rafting team rescued people, luizenses sheltered neighbors and relatives, collected donations and prepared meals for families in garages. According to the luizenses, the Army and other military agencies arrived too late, i.e., after local people had already organized and taken action for rescue and protection.

The power of localism was also reinforced. Army personnel rejected the help of a local rafting team, familiar with the river. Many of these officers’ boats capsized as they attempted rescue operations, and these official “heroes” had themselves to be rescued. The local disaster narrative is that there were no fatalities thanks to the work of local rafters they came to call “the Rafting Angels.” The history of the Rafting Angels did not gain visibility in external newspaper Folha de São Paulo, but it was recalled in Reconstruction Newspaper, a magazine created by locals to give voice to their disaster recovery process, to express their localism and resistance (Scott, 1985; Brodine, 2011; Dunbar-Hester, 2013).
In late March 2010, the journal featured an article titled “Angels and heroes of rafting.” The article read: “the flood that was extensive became violent. An elderly lady had the whole house affected, but soon she met the rafting guys. She said, “They were real angels and had all the care in the world to help us. They said words of confidence, asking us to believe in what they were doing” (Prefecture of São Luiz do Paraítinga, 2010, p. 4).

In the city, Rafting Angels was a category of local change. It represents not only a confrontation against the external narrative of “firefighters and military heroes,” but also a reclassification of the rafting jobs’ status in São Luiz do Paraítinga’s society, adding the value of religiosity to them – they became angels. Before the 2010 flood, some *luizenses* classified local rafting instructors as lazy because they only worked on weekends when tourists were in the town. After the flood, when the outsiders came to the city, another local classification emerged, showing how localism has a contextual meaning (Dunbar-Hester, 2013), reinventing itself in relation to the symbolic power of outsiders’ language. In the words of Eduardo, the municipal director of tourism and one of the Rafting Angels: “Before the 2010 flood, the rafting in São Luiz do Paraítinga […] you can ask any local rafting instructor […] people said we were lazy people because we didn’t work during the week. After the flood, we became known as Rafting Angels” (author field notes, November 2011).

Legal localism which is fixed by local government laws (Troutt, 2008) is also challenged during disasters, when a state of emergency may be declared and the law can provisionally suspend the constitution (Agamben, 2005). In São Luiz, the local government authority was questioned and disputed by external governmental agencies, especially by the military, which invaded the city. The Army and other military agencies arrived with their practical elements of governance (weapons, boats and organizational strategies) and symbolic language (organized in troops, serious faces and highly visible weapons) (Marchezini, 2015b). In São Luiz, the military tried to take over the local actions already taken by residents – for the armed officers did not matter if they were from local government “and/or” civil society. The *luizenses*, however, challenged the orders of the outside command. Sandra, a local resident and social worker in the municipal government, recalled the conflict: “The coming of the Army was too late […] one day after the flood. We were already rescuing and bringing food […] And they come up and say ‘stop everything! Now we command’ […] No! We’re going to give our opinion too. We did everything before you arrived” (author field notes, December 2011).

2.2 What for, how and by whom the city should be “built back better”?

The main Church in São Luiz (built 1830–1840) collapsed during the 2010 flood. The church and the central plaza are places of collective practices such as public gatherings, religious and cultural festivals that enabled the creation of the city (Agier, 2011).

In the major floods of 1863, 1967, 1971 and 1996, the third step of the church stairs was the highest level reached by the Paraitinga River. During the 2010 flood, this historical mark was exceeded. Citizens sought refuge first in the high school, then in the Matriz[2] church, subsequently evacuating both tangible heritages listed by CONDEPHAAT as signs of imminent failure appeared. A few hours later, the sacred place was flooded and collapsed. The fall of this revered site brought a profound sense of loss to the community. In the words of the local priest, “It was an unexpected thing […] while our houses were being devastated by the waters, we felt there was still the house of God and, therefore, in a certain manner, transmitting strength. From the moment in which the house of God fell to the ground, it was as if a hole had been opened, a complete vacuum” (author field notes, November 2011).

Local people and tourists witnessed the fall of this tangible cultural heritage asset, awakening emotions described as a collective pain. “We had a collective pain that was the moment that the Matriz church fell down. The population was silent, each one closed in to himself and no one complained of the damages, because they saw that the damage was
total,” recounted an elderly man. The feelings of collective grief and loss of identity express that the Matriz church was a great point of reference for the locals. As stated by Fabiane, an elderly woman (author field notes December 2011):

[...][the feeling] of the loss of identity was very present in all of the luizenses at the time that we entered the city. We didn’t know that the Matriz Church had fallen [...] you see that cultural heritage all fallen, around which we had a very large identity, because the luizense has a lot of culture, is very tied to their culture, to see everything destroyed [...] it seems that you will never see your city back again.

In the case of São Luiz, the first days after the 2010 flood were marked by the silence of the bells, by the absence of bread in the bakeries, and all surrounded by mud, debris and the stench of rotting meat. However, the resistance of the luizenses also marked this period in the form of daily practices of recovery. They created networks of neighbors, friends and workers in order to clean and remove debris from houses and commercial establishments, removing mud from churches and searching for images of saints, books and photographs. They were remaking their city (Agier, 2011) and recovering their way of being luizense (Marchezini, 2015a) – their localism – and the flood poem expressed their fight to be recognized as luizense: “But luizense are strong, they bring the origins of the past [...] Our culture is alive; the water did not carry it away [...]”

Luizenses resisted other forms of social suffering, barriers and conflicts. Benedito, an elderly artist from his home, on the hill of Cruzeiro, saw the Matriz Plaza covered by ruins. Grabbing his camera he went to capture some images of the disaster. At the Plaza, an army officer reprimanded him and pulled the camera out of his hands. Meanwhile, outsiders, or disaster “tourists,” circulated around the ruins of the Matriz church, taking clay bricks from this nineteenth century historical site. He felt violated because the symbols of his city were being violated by outsiders and locals did not have control over their city.

The Matriz church is very important for luizense’s identity (Marchezini, 2015a) and to their place-making practices (Breunlin and Regis, 2006). It is also an expression of localism, since the rebuilding of this tangible heritage asset provoked several conflicts between CONDEPHAAT’s architectonic parameters and the way luizenses want to “build back better” with the Matriz church. Most historical dwellings surrounding the traditional Portuguese colonial style square plaza of the Matriz church just collapsed with the flood, leaving elderly residents homeless. According to CONDEPHAAT, historical dwellings must be reconstructed and restored following technical standards; the local owners, however, did not have any resources to accomplish this. In order to prevent them from accessing their ruined dwellings, CONDEPHAAT built fences, thus preventing home owners from recovering their household routines. Baptisms, weddings and cultural festivals, no longer existed. A survivor who lost his father after the flood stated: “We are passing through a very great trial [...] no one died in the flood, right? [...] And after? The quantity of people who died afterwards, of sadness, of suffering, of depression, it was a lot of people [...]” (author field notes, November 2011). These new threats identified by local people in the frontline were not incorporated in the disaster recovery plan and/or inserted in the disaster’s numbers and statistics and/or reported by newspapers. As stated by Kishore et al. (2018), indirect causes of death resulting from delayed health care or from worsening of chronic conditions (Adams et al., 2009) are difficult to be attributed to disasters in order to define the scale and severity of the crisis and to targeting interventions for recovering.

Such as reported in other disaster scenarios (Breunlin and Regis, 2006; Barrios, 2014; Ugarte and Salgado, 2014), many displaced families faced the threat of homelessness and unemployment in São Luiz. Many moved out to another city. According to luizenses, about 250 people left and were classified as “fake luizenses” by local people who expressed “more localism.” The luizense’s “way of being” is clearly connected to staying in the city, to
resisting in it and with it, and to seeing the city as a constituent of its own history. Pedro, a local resident, states: “People believe, therefore, that the city will only really have complete life when the Matriz church is inaugurated, one of the principal works of the city […] that will already begin now [December 2011, 23 months after the flood]. Then it’s this, I think that we didn’t lose strength, I think that who wasn’t from the city went away, and we stayed here […] you are not going to move your feet from that which is yours, that is your history, thus it’s this, I think that the same feeling that was mine was that of everybody here, the majority” (author field notes, December 2011).

The ethnography of disasters (Brodine, 2011; Barrios, 2014, Zhang, 2016) also reveals different barriers in the bureaucratic procedures of legal and emergency measures of different governmental agencies with their jurisdictions and inconsistent agendas, such as CONDEPHAAT’s regulations for the reconstruction of the historical center in São Luiz do Paraitinga. In the midst of these power struggles, the luizenses also lost their capacity to speak for themselves and to define their future. Externally, governmental agencies organized public hearings to “give a voice to the local people,” expressing the valuable discourse of localism. However, public hearings were only informative. Luizenses could not give their suggestions for creating recovery policies for their own city. The individuals who held the microphones and who sat in front of the table were mostly external agents. They used technical and scientific terms that disregarded any values that luizenses had about their city, river and culture. During a public hearing, an external engineer showed how to construct walls along the Paraitinga River to protect local people from floods. Suzana, a resident of the city, noticed that very few fellow residents were consulted about their opinions. For her, the Paraitinga River is a part of the culture of São Luiz; the river was a part of the luizenses’ life, including the floods. Roberto, a local owner, recounted the subtle ways in which this “public” hearing silenced the locals:

They [external authorities] organized the roundtable and held the microphone. When you had just asked something, the person who was controlling the microphone went away from you. On the roundtable, an authority answered something completely different from your question. And did not give you the right to reply. So you had to scream. But if you screamed, it would be considered a contempt of authority (Author field notes November 2011, emphasis added).

Roberto was also outraged with these forms of subordination to the external agents. For him, residents were apathetic, silencing themselves amid the expert discourses of external agents who spoke for luizenses, identified what was the best for them and defined what ways the reconstruction processes should proceed. In the voice of an elderly woman: “São Luiz was invaded by outsiders. Outsiders draw up plans for the properties. Outsiders formulate the governmental policies. Outsiders say how we should build our houses […] our future is not defined by ourselves. We are not the protagonists of this town anymore, says Adriana” (author field notes, December 2011).

But luizenses also expressed their localism through several acts of resistance. Little by little, they began to come to the Plaza of the Matriz church as a socializing space. A temporary structure was reconstructed to reinstall the church bell. The bell helped to recover a sense of community. Luizenses created a local disaster recovery committee called “Ceresta” (Centro de Reconstituição Sustentável de São Luiz do Paraitiga). People maintained morale by conducting masses in adapted spaces or having religious rituals in the streets. They also sought for other religions that allow the circulation of faith and by organized sociocultural manifestations such as the Feast of the Divine Saint Spirit and Carnival. Such popular festivities constituted a deep expression of resistance and localism. Even with innumerable losses in 2010, luizenses collected offerings to organize the afogado, a traditional food made of stewed beef, served with manioc flour and rice and eaten together in the city market place during the Saint Spirit Festival. Art manifestation, such as painting
the marks of levels reached by the flood waters on some historic mansions show an aesthetic expression chosen by the inhabitants in order to speak about the disaster and always remember. Moreover, close to the Matriz a poet announces his Flood Poem whenever a tourist or researcher asks something about the 2010 disaster, using his voice as the instrument to express the confrontation of adversities and to resist in the process of social recovery.

3. Discussion

Localism has been framed in diverse ways according to the interests of social groups placed in contextual meanings and, sometimes, in different phases of risk and disaster management. This paper pointed out some confronting discourses and practices of local and external agents during the long-term disaster recovery process of São Luiz do Paraitinga town, Brazil.

One important driver of localism is disaster narrative framing that allowed identification of how localism is composed, by whom and how. The discursive battles are important to create spaces for advocating and researching in risk and disaster situations. Risk and disaster framings, terminologies, databases, indexes, approaches and metrics are always influenced by ideologies (militarism, nationalism and neoliberalism), history and culture (war and post war fragility, traditions and religions, colonial and post-colonial heritage), and social and economic structures (distribution of power, wealth and resources) (Wisner et al., 2004). São Luiz do Paraitinga had particular words that synthesized barriers and conflicts, such as “rafting angels,” luízenses, outsiders and “fake luízenses.” These words from the frontline express the conflicts between military and civil order, the external agents’ choreographies of governance and local acts of resistance, and the diverse and even conflicting expressions of localism between the locals. Views from the frontline (VFL) methods (Global Network of Civil Society Organizations for Disaster Reduction, 2013; Botha and Van Niekerk, 2013) are an important mechanism of resistance that can be used in several ways, including the monitoring of the long-term disaster recovery process, especially in regions where the political and economic instability is high. In Americas, for example, several cases of human rights violation and threats in the long-term aftermath of disasters were reported (Breunlin and Regis, 2006; Briones Gamboa, 2010; Barrios, 2014; Marchezini, 2014; Ugarte and Salgado, 2014), showing that sometimes the disaster recovery process was only a promise, and never a reality.

Are such threats and violations being heard by institutions responsible for the implementation of resilience strategies? Protests have been used as a weapon (Scott, 1985) to lift the invisibility of neglected disasters, protracted crisis and hidden long-term catastrophes (Barrios, 2014; Marchezini, 2014). In São Luiz do Paraitinga, there were other expressions of resistance, such as the local newspaper created to talk about the disaster recovery process, the cultural festivals of Divine and Carnival, the poems and music about the disaster, the paintings, the creation of the Ceresta – the local committee for disaster recovery – and the local NGOs. Other expressions of resistance and activism include parades, street arts and acts of memorialization (Breunlin and Regis, 2006; Barrios, 2010; Brodine, 2011).

One important aspect that needs further research is longitudinal studies to investigate how the barriers are changing between the generations, and how intergenerational dialogues can be promoted to sustain long-term participation and localism. It is also important to ask how local capacity can be maintained for future generations when they in turn have to face disasters. In São Luiz do Paraitinga, my research analysis about disaster recovery process ended in June, 2013. One year later, we started a pilot citizen science educational project with the local high school and ran 12 workshops to promote participatory early warning systems (Marchezini et al., 2017). Two of these workshops – entitled “Workshop for the Future” – were designed to create a Committee for Disasters Prevention and the Protection of Life.
Using a participatory methodology, we divided students, teachers and civil defense agents into four groups. Each group envisioned a collective dream (wish tree) for a disasters safe community, identified the main barriers (rocks on the way) for making their dream real and planned (bridge of actions) ways to overcome barriers. Interestingly, all four groups stated their distrust of authorities and identified corruption and lack of information as the main obstacles for reaching their collective dream for a community safe from disasters.

4. Conclusions

This paper highlighted how discourses and practices were performed by external actors in order to maintain control of the place during emergency and disaster recovery phases and the way locals cope with this top-down approach. One important recommendation is the need to identify who is talking about the importance of local and how localism has been framed in policy and action. It is important to empower localism in order to provide ways for local people sharing what is going on in the frontline. But it is also essential to provide funding and means of implementation for local initiatives regarding advocating, researching and proposing DRR interventions led by people, typically once they have demonstrated a collective capacity during disaster recovery.

Researchers, policymakers, local community and practitioners must build a dialogue-oriented nexus approach to reduce some barriers, improving the long-term efforts to promote and sustain bridging values such as citizen science, action research and citizen-science-policy interface. In the research field, it is important to find ways to include VFL methods and extend integrated research on DRR to meet educational and extension objectives, such as those pointed out by the forensic investigations of disasters framework (Oliver-Smith et al., 2016). Views and voices from the oppressed people in the frontline – such as expressed in the flood poem – are important to avoid social abandonment, but it is also essential to dialogue about the root causes and dynamic pressures that create vulnerability and the ways safety and sustainability can be enhanced (Freire, 2005).

Notes

1. The poem was video-taped and is available in Portuguese: www.youtube.com/watch?v=2uGmySvk34

2. Matriz, from the Latin, means the Mother Church. We use this name throughout the text for São Luiz’ main church.

References


**Corresponding author**

Victor Marchezini can be contacted at: victor.marchezini@cemaden.gov.br

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website: www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm

Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com