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Local-based solutions for closing gaps in disaster research, policy and practice

Increased frequency and severity in climate change events has captivated the disaster management community at multiple scales. This situation calls for shifts in attention towards disaster responses. There is now growing recognition of the need to engage communities experiencing climatic phenomena in designing and implementing disaster management measures. For example, the [Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction](#) recognises local knowledge and practices in complementing scientific knowledge in disaster risk assessment and the development and implementation of interventions that are tailored to local contexts. Experiences with the Cyclone Idai induced floods in Zimbabwe offer useful leads towards understanding local action in disaster management. The magnitude of damage caused by the cyclone has not only exposed deficiencies in the country's disaster management system, but has also revealed that when faced with an unanticipated catastrophe, locals can use their social networks, norms, relationships and collective ingenuity to minimise threats to their lives, assets and livelihoods. These local experiences and actions need to be understood in order to determine their significance towards strengthening disaster management regimes.

Learning from local experiences: opportunities and limitations of local-based disaster action

Evidence Zimbabwe's Rusitu Valley, Chimanimani, following the Cyclone Idai induced floods on 15 March 2019, show three groups of people whose accounts are critical in understanding local experiences in disasters: people directly affected by the disaster or survivors; 'heroes' who risked their own lives to save people trapped by floods; and 'community Samaritans' who accommodated the survivors and met their immediate needs. Results show that when locals experience an emergency, they do not passively look for outside assistance, but utilise their local capital to minimise disaster

impact. There are many benefits emerging from engaging locals in disaster research and management. First, interacting with locals who witness the disaster helps in getting rich accounts about the situation. The participants are able to give detailed accounts of events that occurred during the disaster phase before the coming in of external assistance, which would otherwise remain masked owing to inaccessibility of some areas and delays by outsiders. Second, their timely intervention helps in minimising the disaster impact. For example, the roles of local actors in issuing early warnings before the floods, their rescue efforts and operations during the floods, and actions they take to assist survivors and meet their immediate welfare are critical in alleviating the effects of disasters on people. Third, the long-term psychosocial effects experienced by survivors are better addressed within a system of social capital involving friends, relatives, neighbours and familiar villagers than extending the trust to strangers outside their community. Fourth, locals can help in coordinating responses and recovery efforts based on their experiences and contextual knowledge about the affected community. They can guide the operations of external agencies from the point of identifying survivors to the design and implementation of recovery projects. However, local response has its own share of limitations. It largely tends to be inconsistent and poorly coordinated. There are also mixed feelings about the coming in of external aid agencies. Some villagers saw it as an opportunity to absolve them from responsibilities of care and support. There is also a feeling that survivors are over pampered with donations. Others anticipate to be rewarded by government agencies for the roles they would have played, or to be compensated for the loss they would have incurred in assisting survivors. On the other hand, survivors feel that external support ends prematurely. If not carefully handled, this situation creates another form of disaster in the form of division between the survivors and other villagers.

Gap filling options for strengthening disaster management systems

Local action helps in filling in the gaps in national disaster management systems. The use of locals can facilitate the operations of external players during the emergency response phase and the restoration phase of disasters. Aside from enhanced knowledge in strengthening disaster management regimes, there is an opportunity for meaningful participation of local actors in disaster management and response. Accordingly, there should be systematic development of a national early action approach at the local level to supplement national delayed action and improve the overall mitigation and reduction of disaster risk.

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