

Routledge Handbook
of Disaster Risk Reduction including Climate Change Adaptation

NGOs

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Introduction

Civil society organisations working at the local level can offer valuable insights into the relationship between Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and Climate Change Adaptation (CCA). They bring an understanding of how these thematic areas are perceived by risk-affected people in diverse contexts. However as well as their potential, civil society organisations face many constraints. This chapter considers the recent development and roles of civil society organisations, recognising both the contributions they can make and the constraints they face. It focuses on the case of an international network of civil society organisations to draw out insights on the interface between DRR and CCA from the local perspective, ultimately arguing for CCA as part of DRR.

The contribution and constraints of civil society organisations

A widely quoted statement regarding the relationship between the ideal and the practical reality of civil society is ‘We dreamed of Civil Society and they gave us NGOs [non-governmental organisations]’ (Misslevitz quoted in Einhorn, 2005: p 12). It suggests disquiet about this relationship. To understand what lies behind this we need to consider the origins, development and context of civil society.

Whilst the term has held various meanings historically, it is commonly accepted (e.g. Fowler, 2011; Banks and Hulme, 2012) that civil society in its current form, particularly in the context of international development, emerged and expanded as a response to the humanitarian emergencies created by the second world war (Duffield, 2007). The subsequent decades saw growing programmes of humanitarian assistance and the emergence of civil society organisations (CSOs) at several scales. Most visibly International Non Governmental Organisations (INGOs), a few of which (e.g. Save the Children Fund and the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies) were already in operation, but many of which were established in the post-war period (including Christian Aid, CARE, Catholic Relief Services, Oxfam and World Vision (Duffield, 2007). Mainly headquartered in the north, representing the more wealthy world and thus relatively distant from local concerns, these represented a significant strand of civil society. As these agencies grew in scale and resources there was increasing awareness of the idea of ‘doing development’ as well as humanitarian response. This led to an emphasis in many cases on the importance of community development (Banks and Hulme, 2012). A comparable transition from disaster response to preparedness led to the emergence of what the United Nations (UN) called ‘Natural Disaster Reduction’ in 1987, and the nomination of the 1990s as the ‘International Decade of Natural Disaster Reduction’. The mushrooming development and humanitarian response industry was interpreted by some as a welcome means of substituting for the shrinkage of the State and its responsibilities, reflecting the dominant neo-liberal agenda of the 80s and 90s (Fowler, 2011).

Alongside the large INGOs another growing layer of civil society consisted of smaller national and sub-national NGOs, often enlisted as ‘partners’ to the larger organisations to deliver their programmes at the local level. Distinct from these a further layer consisted of ‘grassroots organisations’. These emphasised local legitimacy and involvement and often resisted becoming delivery agents for the larger NGOs and INGOs (Edwards, 2011), instead maintaining action agendas defined and agreed locally.

To this burgeoning industry was added a further emergent phenomenon of transnational networks and movements including the Nestlé baby milk campaign (Keck and Sikkink, 1998), the Jubilee 2000 campaign (Clark, 2003), and The International Campaign to Ban Landmines (Cox, 2011). Their existence became possible partly because of globalising trends, such as increasing impacts of multinational companies’ operations and globalised economic flows. They were also particularly enabled by new communications technologies; initially email, followed by later technologies such as skype which enabled instantaneous and cheap communication (the asynchronous nature of email also helped to reduce timezone challenges) (Waddell, 2011; Mawdsley et al., 2002).

Since the second world war a multi-layered and interdependent industry representing the practical embodiment of 'civil society' has therefore been constructed. Why does our opening quotation contrast the reality of NGOs with the ideal of civil society? A structuralist, actor based perspective emphasising the different motivations and priorities of the range of actors making up organisations (Long, 2001) suggests that the industry, like any institution, is partly configured by it and it's participants' own need for survival (Clemens and Cook, 1999). This can be seen at an organisational and individual level (Lister, 2003). Organisations large and small have to secure funding which in turn defines their behaviour. Projects have to be delivered according to the objectives set by the funding agencies, whether they are relevant to the ultimate goals of organisations and the communities they serve or not. The methodologies through which projects and their objectives are delivered can become embedded as accepted practice and again can become self serving rather than meeting the stated goals of the organisation. Participative methodologies are an example of this, becoming in some cases 'tyrannies' (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). Choices made in development projects can be shaped by national and commercial priorities (e.g. see Baird and Shoemaker, 2007). INGOs and NGOs dependent on state and institutional funding have to pursue programmes consistent with donor priorities and ideologies, leading one commentator with deep experience of the industry to argue that the development system maintains the dichotomy of social protection in the north i.e. the more wealthy world and self reliance in the south or those less affluent countries rather than challenging it (Duffield, 2007). It is critiques such as these, often emanating from actors within the industry, which lead to the heartfelt complaint 'we dreamed of Civil Society and we got NGOs'.

Evaluation of NGO impact has become increasingly important as the scale of investment leads governments and other donors to assess 'value for money'. An early survey of evaluations carried out by a number of governments found that a majority of programmes evaluated were 'successful' in terms of their immediate goals, but raised the question of whether they were achieving wider impact on societal change and progress (ODI, 1996). This theme is echoed by other commentators including Edwards (2008) whose survey distinguished between substantial successes in 'service delivery' but more limited impact in addressing broader systemic factors such as the perpetuation of poverty and the abuse of human rights, reflecting his view that agencies have failed to innovate in their relationships with partners and in terms of downward accountability. Banks and Hulme (2012) argue that the growth of the development industry has led to a gradual separation of NGOs from their grassroots origins and closer liaison with and dependency on governments. Contrasting with this trend they give as an exemplar the case of 'shack/slum dwellers international', which has strong grassroots connections and uses processes of knowledge sharing through citizen-led surveying and through face to face meetings between communities to enable its participants to engage with structural issues. On a global scale NGO led movements and consortia have achieved substantial impact through campaigns such as the Nestlé, anti mine and Jubilee 2000 campaigns mentioned above, whereas other campaigns such as 'Make Poverty History' have been hampered by the constraints of the INGO consortia leading them (Cox, 2011). The Global Network of Civil Society Organisations for Disaster Reduction (GNDR) allied its experience of a particular global action and campaign 'Views from the Frontline' to the concept of 'communities of praxis' (Gibson, 2012); suggesting that cohering a range of organisations around a shared action reflecting the common goals of the organisations enabled it both to advance its cause and to achieve shared learning from reflection on its actions, echoing the Freirian concept of 'praxis' as an engine for change (Freire, 1970).

Whether through restructuring to emphasise the local, through new collaborations or through new modes of action and learning there is a common view that NGOs at every scale should exercise critical reflection and consider radical reform to strengthen legitimacy at whatever level they work, avoiding co-option to political and commercial agendas (Banks and Hulme, 2012; Edwards, 2008; Mawdsley et al., 2002).

Within this diverse industry GNDR links several forms of civil society and is active at the meeting point between DRR and CCA. GNDR is a transnational network which draws together a large number of such organisations (over 1000 in 2015) ranging from INGO scale down to grassroots organisations. With origins in the DRR thematic area its membership embraces organisations also concerned with CCA and Sustainable Development. The case highlights their practitioner and experiential perspective on links between DRR and CCA and why CCA should become embedded within DRR. The GNDR also demonstrates how the potential and constraints of NGOs have played out. In the following sections the term 'Civil Society Organisation (CSO)' will be used to refer to the wide range of GNDR member organisations, including INGOs, NGOs and grassroots organisations.

Learning from a group of CSOs: The local perspective

The work of GNDR's membership, particularly their collaboration on the 'Views from the Frontline', 'Action at the Frontline' and 'Frontline' shared actions (see Box 1) has generated significant learning regarding local level experience of risk and resilience, and about the links between DRR and CCA. This has led to an identified need to embed CCA within DRR actions given the lack of distinction between the two at the local level (Wisner et al., 2014).

BOX 1: The Global Network of Civil Society Organisations for Disaster Reduction (www.gndr.org) The 'Global Network of Civil Society Organisations for Disaster Reduction' (GNDR) was formed in 2007 through the recognition that member organisations could do more together than apart. In 2015 its membership of Civil Society Organisations passed the one thousand mark. It initially coordinated its members to provide a complementary local level perspective on progress of the United Nations International Strategy on Disaster Reduction's (UNISDR's) 'Hyogo Framework for Action' on Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR). Its main action was the 'Views from the Frontline' (VFL) programme, conducted in 2009, 2011 and 2013 and reporting at the biennial UNISDR 'Global Platform for Disaster Reduction'.

Consultation and learning from these actions led to a local level focus through the 'Action at the Frontline' programme. This was designed to support members in collaboration with local communities for action and learning, offering an alternative to short term project-driven interventions. During 2013-2015 it was developed into 'Frontline' which provided the ability to gather together knowledge from local level to provide analysis and insights at national and global levels to inform better implementation and practice through understanding local needs and priorities. The work of the members has provided rich knowledge of local level risk and resilience as well as of the potential of, and the problems faced by Civil Society, particularly working at local levels.

Initial work conducted in Views from the Frontline (2008-2013) suggested anecdotally that from the local perspective threats to prosperity, livelihoods and lives are not neatly segregated into different thematic areas. People consider the combination of factors that affect them: environmental, social, economic and political (see also Mercer, 2010). It also suggested that many of these threats were not from large scale, intensive, high visibility events but from multiple, small scale, fast and slow onset events (VFL, 2013). The overall profile of these events seemed to be highly variable from locality to locality, rather than fitting a limited set of risk profiles. In understanding and addressing these the links between different scales were weak, and this observation encompassed governance, information and resources. It seemed that in many cases people at local level were the first, and often only actors and responders (VFL, 2011). Since many of the factors that affected them weren't classified as emergencies they weren't recorded or resourced beyond local level. Not only was understanding of these many factors often restricted to local level but information at other scales was often not accessible at local level (VFL, 2013).

More recently (2013-2015) GNDR's own reflection led it to develop 'Frontline' to explicitly gather this local level knowledge (Frontline, 2015). Findings from work in fifteen Latin American countries and now extending to a further fifteen countries in other regions provides an evidence base which largely confirms the anecdotal findings from VFL. In common with other investigations (i.e. UNISDR 'Global Assessment Review' (GAR), 2015) it shows that while large scale disasters have a devastating impact, small scale disasters account for over 40% of losses and over 90% of records at local level. It also confirms the finding that a mix of factors affect people; for example in the Latin American data the third highest priority threat according to local level respondents is insecurity resulting from crime and violence. The data also displays high variability. For example a dataset from thirty communities in Indonesia shows very limited correlation from community to community (Frontline, 2015). Respondents also cite poor governance, lack of information and lack of resources as major barriers to progress.

The findings from VFL and Frontline are summarised in Table 1 below:

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A further body of work conducted by GNDR member organisations provides specific case study insights on the interplay between DRR and CCA. ‘Action at the Frontline’ (AFL) is the local component of the Frontline programme, in which participants take the Frontline data gathered in their locality and use it as a basis for discussion, action planning, partnership building and implementation. Not only does this meet the request of the members for the programme to be directly relevant at local level, but it provides case studies which complement the Frontline analysis, bring it to life, and test its conclusions against specific situations. These case studies reveal a complex interplay between different threats related to climate change and other causes; see for example the case from Kiribati (Box 2)

Box 2: Interconnected hazards in a small island developing state

Small Island Developing States face some of the starkest challenges resulting from hazards including climate change. GNDR member organization ‘Foundation for the Peoples of the South Pacific Kiribati’ (FSPK) working on this pacific island group right on the equator, has been conducting an Action at the Frontline programme in the most populous island of the group, South Tarawa (AFL, 2015). People there face multiple threats including from increased flooding during king tides, saline incursion reducing access to fresh water, increased sea temperature and acidity reducing the haul from fishing, droughts damaging production of copra, and from social pressures resulting from the gradual loss of land for accommodation. These threats are amplified by migration to South Tarawa from other islands in the group as unemployment increases, driven by the reduced income from fisheries and agriculture. The increased population density also heightens environmental degradation. Particular groups such as those living with disabilities are neglected and marginalized as a result of the social and economic pressures. FSPK found that while people were extremely concerned about the decline in their livelihoods they did not understand the causes. For example they blamed the increased salinity of drinking water from wells on the hot sun.

FSPK adopted the creative solution of making a disabled community – Tetoamatoa – champions to promote community understanding and action on the effects of climate change. This led to the development of a coalition of local people, organisations and government to identify and drive options for action taking account of all the threats facing the island’s inhabitants.

The case illustrates the importance of embedding CCA within DRR activities and also that the effects of climate change are variable and very specific to local contexts. For example Lavell (2015) found that Frontline data for Central America depicted high variability in risk profiles.

Acquiring useful knowledge and sharing community perspectives can be challenging. For example on the North coast of Vietnam GNDR member organization ‘Development Workshop France’, with a focus on the development of safe housing at community level, finds that communities have developed understanding of a wide range of threats which they have experienced for centuries – typhoons and floods for example. What they find more difficult to understand is how to factor in the progressive changes in these phenomena resulting from climate change. The political context is one in which they neither have good access to technical knowledge from government institutions, or the ability to share their own experience and concerns. CCA adds a dimension of complexity to their DRR activities which is difficult for them, in the absence of this information, to understand (AFL, 2015).

The threats that communities face can’t be addressed separately but have to be considered holistically. For example in Western Alexandria, Egypt, progressive reduction of agricultural productivity is believed to be a result of droughts potentially exacerbated by climate change. This triggers a pattern of migration in and out of the area which in turn increases economic and environmental pressures. As the area is on the border of two administrative regions governance is poor. The work of the CSO in this area focused on strengthening local self organization to manage this range of interlocking pressures. Similarly in another AFL programme on Kenya’s Somali border the CSO found that response to increasing droughts was impeded by local ethnic conflict. Ethnic tensions also led to poor local governance as people tended to travel from their homes to sympathetic ethnic areas to vote, resulting in them having no representation in their own locality. AFL activities facilitated by the CSO focused on critical self reflection by the community to identify how they could take actions locally and also engage with local government. These case studies show the effects of hazards including climate change interacting with economic and political factors, social pressures, poor governance and conflict. They underpin the argument that at local level, silos (including that of DRR and CCA) must be broken down to achieve progress (AFL, 2015).

Local level response alone is often insufficient. For example participants in an AFL programme in Malawi saw engagement with government as critical to progress as without shifting from a situation where the government only responds to events classified as emergencies the majority of small scale threats would continue to be neglected. A district government officer from the region involved in the discussion strongly supported this view (Personal communication, 2015). A further case study in Namibia showed a similar pattern, where repeated everyday disasters – flooding parts of a provincial town annually as a result of the topography and poor drainage – were ignored as they did not trigger emergency response (AFL, 2011). Poor linkages of knowledge and governance create constraints that can't be addressed purely by local action.

This vein of rich qualitative information is drawn together in summary table 2, extending table 1 and adding the additional factor of poor understanding of climate change which has been highlighted in the AFL cases.

<TABLE 2 HERE>

Overall the cases support the idea that CCA represents a particular risk factor within peoples' integrated understanding of the risks they face. From a local perspective CCA should be situated within DRR. However, the cases show that climate change, as with other hazards and drivers, presents particular challenges, distinct from other threats understood and addressed locally. Its environmental effects are unclear and highly variable, the timeframes and scale of changes are also unpredictable. Knowledge is often difficult to access at local level and integrating this threat into the complex multi-threat profiles experienced at local level demands an interplay between local experiential knowledge and other sources of technical knowledge which is also often lacking.

In all of the above, civil society, particularly where it combines engagement at local level with bridge-building capacities to other scales of knowledge and governance, is potentially well-equipped to build bridges of understanding, contextualized responses, and learning from action. The following section investigates this potential, and the associated constraints of civil society

Civil society: the potential and the challenge

Experience from GNDR working with member organisations since 2008 leads us to argue strongly on the basis of the work and evidence of the VFL, AFL and Frontline programmes that CSOs can make an important contribution to learning and action. This is rooted in an understanding of the interaction of many, often small-scale threats at local level and in the importance of linking local level action to other scales of knowledge, governance and resourcing. The case studies above reinforce the necessity for an integrated approach to multiple threats They also demonstrate that local action can only achieve so much, and part of the CSO role is to build bridges to other organisations, sources of expertise, and sources of political leverage and influence. In GNDR's case consultation with members has revealed that both the association with the GNDR's actions (such as VFL) and identity with a global network are factors which strengthen the influence of CSOs when attempting to influence government at local and national levels.

In exerting such influence CSOs work from a foundation of the integrated understanding of DRR and CCA outlined in tables 1 and 2 above. They are natural advocates for this perspective. In practice CSOs also face constraints. To undertake this bridge-building role CSOs need to have local engagement, ability to operate across scales, and freedom to do so. However in many cases CSOs become service delivery agents delivering programmes of work which are often externally defined, are not shaped to take account of specific local contexts, are often short term due to donor requirements, and which allow limited learning and adaptation. See box 3 for a case illustrating the constraints faced by many CSOs

Box 3: Escaping the project treadmill

A member organisation in Malawi explained the value of the AFL programme, for which they receive a very small amount of funding, as being the only opportunity they have to work together with a community, develop common understanding, analyse local needs critically and fashion sustainable action plans (personal communication, date?). By contrast they explained that the funded project work

which fills the rest of their week may have an element of ‘participation’ but in reality the project goals are determined, the project is delivered and sustainability and learning are very limited.

Small activist CSOs have little time to be reflective or strategic. Without time to reflect and think critically they tend to reproduce standard approaches rather than learning from their experience. Without time to explore new options and partnerships they are unable to build the bridges which give them greater influence. All of this is driven by the project funding machine, which has the effect of enforcing the current view of development on organisations who know from their local experience that this view is often deeply flawed. Table 3 depicts both the potential and the constraints of CSOs identified in this discussion:

<TABLE 3 HERE>

GNDR has provided one context to step out of these constraints through programmes focusing on local level learning and action, and building bridges to other scales. More generally enabling CSOs to fulfill a unique bridge-building role demands changes in their positioning and engagement including:

1. **Recognition.** Like the communities they serve, local CSOs are often the last who are heard in the fashioning of development priorities and programmes. Rather than treating them as passive service delivery agents their local experience and ability to engage cross-scale could be strengthened by involving them and resourcing them as active agents to build two way flows of understanding and action. At least one large development fund – USAID’s ‘localworks’ – is currently experimenting with a collaboration model to achieve this (<https://www.usaid.gov/partnership-opportunities/ngo/localworks>).

2. **New resourcing models.** Large scale programmes and funding models exclude small scale actors. This is inevitable as agencies try to manage transaction costs but models are needed that bridge between large scale resource allocations and local level resourcing requirements. INGOs play a part in this in working through local partners, though the challenge here is to build genuine partnerships rather than top-down structures. Other novel models include community level grants. To work, these need to make monitoring and accountability requirements appropriate to the scale of funding rather than demanding the same heavy reporting requirements as larger funds. They also need to identify appropriate intermediaries to strengthen access from local level.

3. **Allow more time.** Whilst donors often want to see rapid results, collaborations to act and learn at local level sustainably are often more effective where the scale is smaller and the timescale longer. Project cycles of three years are common (for example the UK Department for International Development’s (DFID) building resilience and adaptation to climate extremes and disasters (Braced) programme (DFID, 2015)) and when the project startup and the final reporting stages are included in this the period allowed to develop engaged and sustainable actions is extremely limited.

4. **Strengthen networks** which enable CSOs to benefit from peer to peer learning, mutual support, shared actions and increased recognition. GNDR is one of a growing group of ‘Global Action Networks’ (Waddell, 2012) which enable CSOs to maintain their local presence and legitimacy whilst strengthening their ability to act as bridge-builders

5. **Support joint civil society actions** for learning, monitoring and accountability. Whilst there are many high level monitoring processes these are usually insensitive to local level impact whereas civil society has the potential to monitor the local level effectiveness of national policies and international frameworks.

Conclusions

At the local level people face very specific combinations of threats to their prosperity and well-being which evidence in this chapter suggests are often small scale, driven by environmental, social, economic and political factors and which interact in very specific ways dependent on local contexts.

This has led to an identified need to embed CCA actions within DRR. However, climate change presents particular challenges of understanding and action as a new and unpredictable factor.

Local experience provides a valuable layer of knowledge, combined with other sources, to inform effective and integrated action to reduce the impact of the many threats people face. This layer is often neglected and CSOs working at local level have the potential to play an important bridge-building role, enabling two way flows of understanding and targeting resources and action to specific contexts. This potential is often constrained by the structures of development and humanitarian action. To realize the potential of CSOs as bridge-builders, and make action more targeted, effective and sustainable their potential and also their constraints should be recognized, their role valued and strengthened and their voices and experience heard. Mechanisms for small scale long term local resourcing should be developed, collaborations and networks should be strengthened and monitoring from the local level perspective should be supported.

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