

Disasters Deconstructed Webinar

Civil Society Organisations responding to COVID-19: A critical role and how to support it.

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The focus of this slot is on opportunities and challenges in action research among practitioners, normally geographically distributed. I outline some previous work and then summarise a recent initiative among local level Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). It's a sort of brief cookbook of things we've found work and don't work in practitioner collaborations in case this is useful in your work.

Two previous projects were

1. **Views from the Frontline (2009-2015 and continuing)** a large scale DRR action research programme mobilising 600 local level CSOs conducting community consultations and initial analysis which was aggregated globally.
2. **Practitioner-led special issue of journal.** gathering a group of 8 local level CSOs to collaborate on producing special edition of Disaster Prevention and Management journal.

These projects revealed both opportunities and challenges in conducting practitioner based action research:

Opportunities

- a. **Output and Process effects.** *Outputs* were the reports and publications. There were also *Process* effects including skills development, relationship and network building, and learning among participants.
- b. **Contextualised DRR:** both projects investigated actionable DRR knowledge showing it to be extremely place and context specific.
- c. **Local experiential knowledge creation.** Both projects highlighted the value of local level knowledge creation underpinning effective DRR policy and practice.

Challenges

- d. **Mobilising practitioners to research:** practitioners are typically *activists* rather than *reflective thinkers*, they don't often reflect on, report on, discuss and learn from their work.
- e. **'Success stories'** – practitioners are regularly required to write these to secure funding, and therefore struggle with thinking critically and being prepared to recognise failure . . . which is often where learning starts
- f. **'Trust'** – local practitioners are often relatively isolated and may lack confidence in exposing their perspectives and ideas to a wider audience
- g. **Linking formal and practitioner research:** Formal researchers demand rigour, narrow focus, rooting in literature etc. Practitioners value relevance, a light touch, and speed – and struggle with academic language!

We mitigated these challenges through:

- a. **A shared action** rather than a discussion/forum group approach. VFL particularly demonstrated the enthusiasm of practitioners to gather round focused, time-bound actions
- b. **Strong facilitation.** This was required to overcome the busyness and isolation of practitioners and stimulate participation

- c. **An iterative process** the journal project gradually encouraged participants to deconstruct their case studies. This helps in building trust and openness and moving from success stories to critical, reflective thinking
- d. **Peer discussion**, in the journal project we encouraged participants to read each others' cases and raise questions and suggestions about them. This further promoted critical thinking which was less threatening peer-to-peer
- e. **Face to face events**, Though costly of resource and time these were powerful in both projects in building trust, openness, and reflective and critical learning. Online alternatives struggle to achieve this.

Research on local level consequences of the Pandemic: Civil Society Organisations responding to COVID-19: A critical role and how to support it

- In the light of the Pandemic we wondered whether there were particular practitioner perspectives and challenges which were relevant but unheard.
- We initiated a practitioner collaboration December 2020-March 2021 to gather local perspectives and identify challenges and drivers of effective community reconstruction.
- We circulated an initial discussion paper to 25 contacts to trigger comments and examples
- Communications were centrally facilitated and personally addressed (mailmerge) reflecting GNRD experience that forums and groups have low take-up rates
- 18 participants of the 25 contacted contributed over 16 (approx. weekly) cycles of communication – an iterative approach.
- In each cycle a summary and update of the previous cycle was sent, inviting further inputs, and these developed *outputs* including a discussion paper followed by a report, a webinar presenting this, and further blogs and reports circulated to regional and global networks.

Findings

As was found initially with VFL, it appears there was an *output* and a *process* effect.

The ***output***, which is ongoing, is dissemination of the findings and recommendations on local level reconstruction in the wake of the pandemic. There were six key findings. they can be accessed from the resources I can circulate

The ***process*** of collaboration and learning was widely appreciated by the participants in stimulating learning, as well as developing a sense of solidarity

The ***challenges*** were, similarly to the previous examples:

Mobilising practitioners to research. Framing the work as a timebound shared action rather than a more general reflection proved effective. By contrast invitations to discuss wider topics have received little response

Building trust. Even the communications method has an effect. We deliberately selected a centrally facilitated approach with personal emails. However when we recently set up an

email *group* we found the response rate very low. When the original mailmerge method was used once more it immediately generated more response

Moving from success stories to a reflective, critical thinking approach. This requires, even over the short period of four months, an iterative approach which gradually unpacks issues and insights

Conclusions

These three specific practitioner research examples have highlighted a range of opportunities and challenges. In terms of DRR research after disasters I feel they highlight:

The opportunity for local level knowledge creation through action research as this foregrounds important local experience and knowledge.

The technical and social challenges in conducting such research with busy and often isolated practitioners.

Resources

- *A paper co-written with Ben Wisner on VFL: 'Lets talk about you'. Journal of Disaster Prevention and Management. 25/5 2016*
- *The special issue of DPM 'Doing it differently by rethinking the nature of knowledge and learning'. Journal of Disaster Prevention and Management 28/1. 2019. Information can also be accessed at www.drr2dev.com*
- *The work conducted on consequences of the pandemic can be accessed at <http://inventing-futures.org/covid-civil-society-organisations/>*
- *Other info at www.inventing-futures.org*