

Making Communities Responsible at Times of Crisis:

Communities, Sustainability & Flooding Governance in the UK

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UK Situation

- 6 m live on floodplains & 1.8 m / 21 m properties at risk
- Floods of 2007 affected 17,000+ households & led to biggest infrastructure loss since WWII
- 20 x increase in risk by 2080s predicted
- Many argue that society should adapt & build up resilience
- Adaptation gained popularity at expense of 'flood prevention' because structural measures fail & are expensive
- Adaptive strategies involve strong role for communities

UK Situation

- 'The community' now central rhetoric
- Greater calls for community involvement in resilience & mitigation
- 2003 'Sustainable Communities Bill'
 - development to be economically productive, environmentally sound & socially sensitive
 - SD best met in cohesive & inclusive communities
- 2006 Communities & Local Government Dept to set policy on housing & planning that provides a "sustainable environment for all"



Communities

- Ascendancy of communities discourse partially explained by its resonance across ideological spectrum
 - Neoliberalism - stress on individuals' responsibility for social issues (as opposed to state)
 - Radical - support for collective action
 - Greens - emphasis upon localism

Communities

- But 'communities' invoked are not the same
 - Neoliberalism - insular, place-based collections of individuals
 - Radicals - 'collectives' connected through their similar social positioning not necessarily their localities
 - Greens - basis for environmentally benign, small-scale form of social organisation

Research Agenda

- This research will....
 - Explore the ascendancy of sustainable communities in environmental policy
 - Analyse benefits & limitations of a community focused approach for flooding

Specific Aims

- Analyse nature of communities discourse in current UK policy, paying attention to how they're imagined by Gov Depts
- Critically compare with character of 'lived community' groups
- Explore to what extent a disjuncture exists between what Gov agencies expect from communities & what role groups see for themselves

The Case Study

- Oxford severely flooded in 1947, 2000, 2003 & 2007
- 2000 & 2003 floods described as '1-in-40-year events'
- Oxford's worst in 2007 → 1000 homes affected, 100s evacuated
- Several residents 'flood action groups' & official community orgs set up



Oxford 2007

- As elsewhere, flooding not only of economic & environmental concern; social costs also high
 - Uninsured residents sought aid from charities
 - Emergency shelter set up in Football Stadium
 - Warnings issued but many elderly & disabled people weren't able to get assistance
 - Vulnerable not always identified by emergency services & many left stranded without vital supplies
 - 100s forced to leave homes for year or more

Oxford

- In 2007, much of work to identify & assist vulnerable was conducted by residents themselves



- “People have really pulled together”
- “Helping neighbours became second nature & we have heard many stories of community spirit & engagement”

2007 & Pitt

- Voluntary efforts by residents also recorded elsewhere in UK



2007 & Pitt Review

- Pitt noted “Community action was one of the most striking impacts of the summer floods” & it “has considerable potential for the future”
- “The Gov should establish a programme to support & encourage individuals & communities to be better prepared & more self-reliant during emergencies”
- Government said it supported “community resilience” where “communities & individuals deploy local resources & expertise to help themselves”

What's Expected of The Community?

- It's asked provide...
 - Their own flood protection
 - Local knowledge
 - Resources & expertise
 - Help in locating vulnerable
 - Shelter for vulnerable
 - Communication of risk
 - Leadership



Leadership

- “In some areas, people look to formal leaders, such as Ward Members, to have a role. In others, leadership is provided by more informal networks, such as existing community groups” (Pitt Review)



Mary, a volunteer flood warden

Sustainable Communities?

- Why might such a community response to flooding be positive?
 - Might empower communities & reduce dependency (Blaikie *et al.* 1994)
 - Flexible?
 - Makes use of local resources
 - Cheaper?
- BUT
 - Empowerment might not be meaningful
 - Could produce unaccountable policy
 - Depends on voluntarism & good will
 - Community is vaguely defined / divisive concept
 - Community approach may not be able to live up to hopes
 - May reinforce unequal power relations or have social injustice connotations