Making Communities Responsible at Times of Crisis:

Communities, Sustainability & Flooding Governance in the UK

Liza Griffin
Governance & Sustainability Programme
Department of Politics & IR
University of Westminster
London

l.griffin3@westminster.ac.uk
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

- 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
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
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 to provide...
  - Their own flood protection
  - Local knowledge
  - Resources & expertise
  - Help in locating vulnerable
  - Shelter for vulnerable
  - Communication of risk
  - 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)
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