Editorial: On the local in localised disaster risk reduction

We hear everywhere that disaster risk reduction needs to be localised, that is, to be downscaled to as close as possible to people who suffer the most in facing what we call disasters. Fair enough. We know that local people are the so-called first line of defence in dealing with hazards of all sorts and that, in dealing with these threats, they are resourceful and knowledgeable. We also recognise that local people know their surroundings better than anyone else and that they are those most interested in saving their lives and livelihoods.

On such basis, localised disaster risk reduction most often focusses on local places, local stakeholders and local actions. Local places are the geographical venues, where hazards occur and people suffer, where resources and knowledge are available. Local stakeholders are the people at risk as well as the local government agencies and local NGOs who are believed to be the best partners with a fine-grained knowledge of the context. Local actions are meant to be crafted after local concerns based on local resources so that they best meet the priorities of those at risk.

If this seems obvious and justified it is also all pointless *if* the issues, concepts, methods and tools we focus on and use are imported from elsewhere; the global. As if disasters, which we all acknowledge are social constructs, could be understood with the same universal concepts and methods across very diverse societies and cultures around the world. Then the local is a token. It is a mere pot to cook a well-known same recipe imposed upon local people all around the world, whether they like it or not.

Ultimately, the local should be about local understandings of the world. Localised disaster risk reduction should therefore interrogate what a disaster is locally, if ever such a thing exists outside of the Western concept imposed everywhere. Localised disaster risk reduction means moving away from such Western ideas that, most often, do not make any sense outside of their cradle; concepts that we cannot even translate in many languages around the world. Localised disaster risk reduction thus entails challenging the taken-for-granted assumption that disasters sit at the interface between hazards and vulnerability that we have inherited from 18th-century Europe.

Where should we start then? The most tangible entry point to people's understanding of the world is probably their language. Language tells what people fear, what they value, how they create and share knowledge and how they do things to alleviate their fears using available knowledge. Localised disaster risk reduction requires understanding if we want the recipe to be cooked using local ingredients and utensils to meet local tastes.

J.C. Gaillard