Risk Communication at the Local Level: Towards Meaningful Community Collaborations on Environmental Hazards

Respectful and Collaborative Research With Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Communities

Summary of Panel Discussion

CMOS CONGRESS / MEOPAR Annual Scientific Meeting 2018 Town Hall Session
Halifax, NS, June 14, 2018

Hosted by the Coast and Ocean Risk Communication
Community of Practice
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Risk Communication at the Local Level:
Towards Meaningful Community Collaborations on Environmental Hazards

A Town Hall Session

at the

Canadian Meterological and Oceanographic Society Congress
&
Marine Envrionmental, Observation, Prediction, and Response Network
Annual Scientific Meeting

Halifax Convention Centre
Halifax, NS, June 14, 2018

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1. Foundational concepts

- Research may cause harm, even when it's well-intentioned.

- Communities have the right to refuse a researcher's desire to circulate knowledge because it might be harmful.

- Indigenous people are rights-holders, not stakeholders. Research results have an impact on their rights. They have the right to data generated in their communities and lands. This is a different relationship than that with industry or government stakeholders.

- Communities have the right to refuse a researcher. They have autonomy and sovereignty; this is true, not just for Indigenous communities, but any community. All have a right to determine whether or not to permit research.

- Know that academics and government staff are not always highly trusted in Indigenous and/or local communities as a group, although there may be trusted individuals.

- Be humble - you don't have the right to research what you want, wherever you want. Approach it more as, 'This is an issue I've noticed. These are my skills and expertise. Are you interested in this topic? What should I do?'. If you get a negative response, move on.

- Research in a community and/or place, if you are invited to do so.

- Each community has perspectives, measures, or ideas of what is right and/or good, what constitutes risk, what counts as good relations, or evidence, etc. If your own research community is different than the one you'd like to do research with, it is likely that your perspective is different than theirs - respect the differences and recognize that yours is not better or worse, but different.

- Be aware that communities are heterogeneous - and often not in agreement.

- Shift away from top-down to bottom-up approach to research: work with people in their communities and make sure the concerns of the community are included in the research, while also helping to reach the professional goals of the other partners involved (e.g., academics, government agencies).

- Learn about data sovereignty and the responsible use of data - data generated in a place belongs to that place and the people living there.

- Use translation/intermediary groups such as NGOs, Indigenous governments, and other groups to approach and communicate with communities. They will be more aware of the behavioural norms, ethics, issues, and modes of communication that matter in a place.

- Hire locals as full co-researchers if you want a truly bottom-up approach to data collection, interpretation, and communication

2. Move away from the information deficit model

Be aware of the pitfalls of deficit model thinking: Communicating about risk or science is not just about providing more information, better information, simpler, or clearer information. People have fundamentally different ways of understanding hazard, risk and impacts.

Sometimes, researchers or experts attribute disagreements, erroneously, to poor risk communication (or poor

communication in general) (e.g., inadequate public engagement; not communicating clearly enough), lack of trust, or an inability of the community members to understand scientific (or risk) concepts or measures; when in fact, the source of disagreement may arise from or be amplified by:

- Differences in what is valued
- Providing over-simplified information when more complex or 'raw' data are what the community needs to make decisions
- Discounting local or Indigenous knowledge systems
- Differences in risk weighting
- Disagreement over who has the right to decide about risks and risk weighting or how to proceed (or not) with a course of action

We - scientists, community members - live in different worlds. It is impossible, or difficult, for people immersed in one world to understand completely, another person's world and (probably unethical or inappropriate) to make decisions for them.

3. Where to start if you are interested in undertaking research in a community?

a) **Do your background work** - Find out if there is an organization that approves or guides research for the community. Find out about, and follow, existing research protocols and processes. The community should not be paying for your learning - make your own effort to find out what you need to know, don't put it on the community to provide it, or do that work for you.

b) **Get to know people** - Visit communities before you start, as a person rather than as a researcher, so that you can get to know the community members and they can get to know you, and you can explore whether there is a shared interest in a research topic. Let them invite you.

c) **Don't just show up to do research** - It's important not just to show up, unannounced and unknown, as a researcher. If you know someone from the community, and if it's ok with them, you could travel with them and have them introduce you to people and help you understand the community - and the community members would then be able to have some insight about you, through the friend who is also a community member.

d) **Key people or groups** - Find out who it's important to listen to and receive advice from in the community and speak with them. Community and local government groups can help with this.

e) **Find out if there is interest** - Ask if people in the community are interested in working with you and in the research you are interested in before you develop your proposal and questions. If they are not, move on. If they are, meet with people, listen, develop your research proposal and and design your questions with community involvement.

f) **Letters of support** - Don't write letters yourselves, and ask communities to sign them. It's their right and responsibility to write the letter and to say what they want to say. While it may seem as though you are saving them work, it can also be patronizing. If in doubt, ask.

g) **Ongoing, meaningful community involvement** - Involve people from the community in meaningful, decision-making roles of the project, especially hiring them as students, advisors, research assistants, partners, etc., not only data collectors or bear guards.

h) **Mutual benefits** - Look for ways of proceeding that provide mutual benefits to the community and the project partners. What counts as a benefit should be decided by these groups.

i) **Ongoing communication and data sharing** - Share research designs, analysis, and results of papers, with the community before publication. Share and collect input on communication materials before they are released to the public. People from the community involved in the project are in ideal positions to communicate with the community about the project in an ongoing manner.

j) **Knowledge mobilization** - By continual involvement of the community in the project, multi-directional 'knowledge mobilization' is likely always happening. But explicitly build in opportunities for

communication to ensure this happens. Recognize also that that people have the right to refuse to circulate knowledge because it might be harmful.

4. Summary of Panel Suggestions

Before starting research projects in Indigenous and/or smaller communities:

1. Familiarize yourself with, and follow, existing local protocols or guidelines for working in an area or community (not just research or university ones).
2. Take time to get to know the people and community, let them get to know you, and find out if there is a mutual and shared interest in undertaking research together. Continue only if there is a shared interest in moving forward with the research.
3. Hire local people as full co-researchers.
4. Develop your proposal and research questions in consultation with the community, so the research meets the community's needs, as well as your own.
5. Don't assume there is a benefit to the community on their behalf - the community has the right to describe and outline benefits, if they exist.
6. Be sensitive to noticing if research is being refused, and withdraw it there is any chance that it may cause harm.
7. Employ and involve community members throughout the project in meaningful, decision-making positions.
8. Work with and through local organizations and governments.
9. Look for, and implement, mutually beneficial approaches and processes.
10. Understand that the community owns and has a right to the data that are collected in their area and/or community.
11. Understand that the community has the right to communicate, comment on, and hear about findings or other project outcomes, first. They have the right to view and comment on drafts of papers or other materials that are prepared concerning the project, prior to their release.
12. Disagreements or lack of consensus, are not necessarily due to poor communication and simply alleviated by more explanations, clearer language, or increased efforts to gain trust. Recognize and respect the fact that individuals and communities value resources, and understand and weigh hazards and risks, differently. A lack of agreement on a course of action (or inaction) may mean that there is a genuine difference in what is valued, or that the community weighs risks and benefits differently.