

Changing policy needs a common language

Often it is said that “Britain and America are two nations divided by a common language” but the actual form and source of the quotation are unclear with attributions to Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, and Winston Churchill amongst others. Nevertheless, the implication is clear, despite both nations speaking English, often what we read or hear from one another differs from the intent of what is written or spoken.

Likewise in many academic and professional contexts although the same words are used, a common meaning and understanding are often not inferred across professions, cultures, nations, and especially by those who are not working in their mother tongue. And then there is the problem of the use of jargon. Our use of jargon misleads or excludes those outside the professional group, especially the general public, when a word or concept (such as risk) takes on an altered and specific meaning.

As the concept of flood risk emerged from the research community into the policy domain in the late 1990's it became clear that the understanding of the concepts around the anatomy of flood risk differed across professional groups and nations. We recognised this early in the FLOODsite integrated research project (see www.floodsite.net) which was funded by the EU in 2004 as an action in the preparation of the EU Floods Directive (European Commission, 2007). Our first output was an agreed language and set of definitions to be used in this international project, which was last revised on project closure (Gouldby, Klijn, Samuels, Sayers, & Schanze, 2009). Looking back over 15 years to this document, it is interesting to note that “resilience” only warranted a short discussion as “The ability of a system/community/society/defence to react to and recover from the damaging effect of realised hazards.”

There are now signs that the policy on flood management is evolving and this will need to be reflected in the language we adopt. In May, the Environment Agency (2019) published a draft national flood and coastal risk management strategy for England with its vision set out as “a nation ready for, and resilient to, flooding and coastal change – today, tomorrow and to the year 2100.” The public consultation on the strategy has now closed, but it is clear that the concept of resilience is set to become a policy action.

This Environment Agency draft strategy was published shortly before the UK Government announced the tightening of policy for the United Kingdom to bring all greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050 (HM Government, 2019). The draft strategy responds to projected future scenarios for flooding and coastal erosion that follow from current and past anthropogenic emissions and it focusses strongly on a place-based view of resilience, linked to the aim for everyone to be able to live in “climate resilient places.”

About 200 responses to the consultation are available to view online (Environment Agency, 2019) and many identify that a limitation of the draft strategy is that it lacks of a clear definition of resilience. Resilience will be interpreted in many ways by different groups of people from different industries. Moreover, with its concentration on resilient places (and implicitly service infrastructure as well as risk management measures) the draft strategy misses much of the human, social, and societal dimensions of resilience; again this is identified in some of the consultation responses. I have long been convinced that flooding is a human problem; its impact on individuals is determined by experience, preparation, and coping capacity and in the end flood damage is measured by values we as a society place on the built and natural environment and upon our cultural heritage.

As we move into a time where the policy focus is upon resilience, it is essential that all professionals working on flood risk management—practitioners, policy-makers, and researchers—have a shared vocabulary for and understanding of resilience and how it is assessed. In a previous editorial (Samuels, 2018), I indicated the potential breadth of resilience as a concept and the importance of considering what comprises resilience at different levels or scales.

It is my opinion that the time is ripe for the flood risk management community internationally to debate what constitutes “flood resilience” and, if resilience is to be adopted as a policy aim, then how is it to be described and assessed or measured. The development of indicators to assess resilience, whether it is place-resilience or a broader concept of system resilience or social resilience, would facilitate an audit of its current state. Monitoring of such indicators will identify progress towards resilience through actions taken in the implementation of a policy based upon it. A resilience appraisal could be introduced as part of a sustainability

appraisal for any proposed intervention or development. Just as it is common to consider residual risk in a flood risk assessment, the individual and social dimensions of resilience should be incorporated into an assessment for extreme floods beyond any design standard as well as for more common events.

The Journal of Flood Risk Management was initiated 12 years ago in response to the identification over the preceding decade of flood risk management as a policy approach in many countries and more broadly within the EU. Through its broad multi-disciplinary scope that covers the established multi-faceted concept of flood risk, the Journal has provided a single place for all involved in flood risk management to access current knowledge and understanding of the science, policy, and practice. We should now move forward recognising that a fuller and common understanding of resilience will be integral to flood risk management in the coming decades. As we found with the setting out the FLOODsite Language of Risk (Gouldby et al., 2009), it will be essential to document clearly cases where a word has different meanings in different countries and professions to avoid as far as we can the pitfalls of being divided by a common language.

As always I am grateful to the support the journal receives from the voluntary work of our reviewers and from members of the Editorial Panel and Board. If you would like

to assist the journal as a reviewer, as a member of our panel of editors or as an associate editor, please contact the journal office.

Paul Samuels
Editor in Chief

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