

## Risk Communication

Communicating risk can be understood as a mutual exchange of information about a process or event so that each party understands well the implications of what has been exchanged and can integrate the information into the local knowledge system and deploy it to good effect. Risk communication in relation to climate change is partly about raising awareness of increasing variability and change to atmospheric processes that may impact upon communities (rural and urban) and their socio-ecological systems. It is about learning the extent of local vulnerability to climate change and this can refer to bio-physical and socio-economic vulnerability. The extent to which a community may or may not be vulnerable to the impacts of climate change is a prerequisite for assessing adaptive capacity and planning for adaptation.

The practice of risk communications is an ongoing, long-term process, not a single event. The nature of the risk will vary over time and space, thus a risk communications strategy must be flexible and adaptable to changing conditions and available knowledge. It entails receipt as well as delivery of information and ideas in a process of two-way 'social' learning employing the idea of 'participative action research' as its principal methodology. Thus the flow of knowledge and information is not unilinear, nor is it composed solely of objective or 'hard data' (e.g. climate science) but must also comprise subjective information such as opinions and concerns. Information and knowledge transmitted has to be understood, interpreted and valorised across different cognitive systems in order to be useful. Communicating risk, with regard to increasing climate change



A panel of Zambian meteorological officers at the community workshop held in Mongu in late 2007 to communicate risk in western Zambia

### *Vignette: Advancing Capacity for Climate Change Adaptation: pilot actions*

The Advancing Capacity for Climate Change Adaptation (ACCCA) project has supported risk communications work in Africa and Asia over the period 2007-09 (with EU and DEFRA funding), with a second phase due for completion in early 2010 (with DFID-IDRC funding). The first phase comprised 14 pilot actions (nine in Africa and five in Asia. The second phase of five actions are in located in Africa.

ACCCA is managed by UNITAR and implemented through a partnership including UNITAR, Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI), START International, ENDA-TM and the Climate Systems Analysis Group (CSAG) of the University of Cape Town. The project is aimed at building capacity to improve decision making in the face of climate vulnerability, and combines scientific evidence and lived experience to assess vulnerability. It brings together the following work areas:

- Climate science: data analysis and scenarios, and learning what part they can play in adaptation at the local level
- Risk communications: developing appropriate communications strategies
- Lived experience: learning how local people interpret climate and integrate understandings of climate into daily lives and livelihoods
- Participative Action Research and social (double loop) learning
- Technical workshops designed to build the knowledge and understanding of the pilot action project teams on climate science and risk communications
- Vulnerability analysis: several tools employed according to local suitability
- Adaptation planning and screening of strategies for risk
- Communication of lessons learned to policy and decision makers and to the wider climate and development community.

Results and lessons learned in the ACCCA project to date reflect the diversity of location, theme and methods engaged, and the different capacities and knowledge available at the time of implementation. Nevertheless, some homogeneity was provided by the fact that most of the pilot actions took place in rural regions.

A good communications strategy was a founding requirement of the ACCCA process, and capacity building for pilot action teams was provided at a technical workshop in Cape Town in October 2007, where a whole day was spent discussing the importance of developing an appropriate communications strategy with appropriate communicators. This was supported by a preliminary guide, *Risk Communications on Climate Change and Variability: Preliminary guidance for ACCCA teams*, provided near the start of implementation in July 2007.<sup>1</sup>

A synthesis document covering the life of the project to June 2009 and discussing both climate science and risk communications work in ACCCA is available at <http://www.acccaproject.org>.

and variability and its current and potential impacts on socio-ecological systems remains a challenge. This may be due to lack of clarity and due to the uncertainty accompanying likely future climate scenarios. Meanwhile, the climate change that most vulnerable communities actually experience is increasing variability, extreme weather events and unpredictability. Meanwhile, by far the greatest barriers to successful risk communications are inadequate 'bundling' of knowledge and information for consumption and deployment by vulnerable communities and poor communications strategies.

Both issues concern the type and quality of information exchanged, particularly from scientific sources that tend to construct and parcel knowledge and information by discipline in the western cognitive system. These parcels of reflective knowledge are very mobile and quickly transported using global media systems constructed in the same system, and arrive at the one world holistic cognitive system employed by poor vulnerable communities and their leadership entities. In order to make use of such knowledge a community has to unpack, interpret and rebundle information in the context of local priorities – lives and livelihoods, in order to comprehend and deploy. This is a time consuming process and sufficient time, in a world of exigency and immediacy, may not be available; therefore, the risk of miscomprehension or misapplication leading to maladaptation, is high.

In terms of adequate and effective communications, in spite of considerable investment of resources, the message regarding the need for action (mitigation and adaptation) to increasing climate change and variability has been confused, misunderstood and/or ignored. The position on awareness is differential with most knowledge and information, and therefore awareness being concentrated in the developed countries of the North. This is ironic given that the regions most vulnerable to the negative impacts of climate change and variability have the least adaptive capacity, in terms of knowledge, information, skills, infrastructure and financial resources to invest in new and alternative technologies. This situation has resulted in unchecked rises in vulnerability and an increasing likelihood that adaptation actions, when taken, will turn out to be reactive rather than proactive.

There has been progress in some regions to climate proofing human security and productive processes but this is not the norm. The scale of the problem concerning knowledge and awareness extends from intergovernmental through national to local decision-maker and community level. This suggests that there has been a failure to date in effective communications between the scientific, donor/INGO/NGO communities and targeted end-user communities.

There are at least two levels of disconnection, one between producers and transporters of information, and user groups and, the other between different hierarchies of user-group. This does not mean that there is insufficient information, probably the opposite would be true, rather it is that knowledge and information is not packaged sufficiently well, and the way in which it has been communicated to date has been inadequate.

A further extension of this argument is that two groups of specialists have been missing from the work of risk communications: appropriate communicators and good managers of both information and people to facilitate good communications and communicators. Without effective communicators and managers, the relevance of climate science and application in sensitive socio-ecological arenas may fail to reach intended end-users.

Risk communications remains a complex and widely under-appreciated theme cutting across physical and social disciplines. Much of the work of communicating risk involves subjective experiential evidence and allowing for self expression through everyday life and livelihoods. It is not easy to measure and model such commodities as morale and postcolonialism yet these are important factors to take into account in building adaptive capacity. Experience in practical risk communications work has demonstrated that climate science is valuable but, as yet, its usefulness in awareness raising and adaptation processes, particularly among policy and decision makers, has yet to be fully appreciated. Much more potent, at this stage, are the social indicators of vulnerability, resilience and stress and the value that only local communities can put on their own situation analysis.

Risk communications, like adaptation, is a social process requiring social science skills to make both biophysical and socio-economic and cultural knowledge useful. To understand a community's resilience to climate change impacts, experience to date has shown the need to understand the social and environmental history of a region and community. A key methodology for this geographical approach is to work at ecosystem or socio-ecological system scale linking human and physical activities over time and space.



Ghana, Afraim Plain

<sup>1</sup> Flint, L. Risk Communications on Climate Change and Variability: Preliminary guidance for ACCCA teams (ENDA, Dakar, 2007)

<sup>2</sup> Zermoglio, F, Devisscher, T. and Padgam, J. *Synthesis Report: Lessons Learned on Climate Science and Risk Communication in the ACCCA Project*(UNITAR, Geneva, 2009)