

Kelman, I. 2010. "Why do Bad Ideas Stick?". Disaster and Social Crisis Research Network Electronic Newsletter, no. 42 (September-November), p. 9.

Full text:

Why do so many bad ideas stick in disaster-related research and practice? Meanwhile, common sense notions tend to garner attention and be seen as innovative.

One example of a bad idea sticking is the post-disaster "return to normal" paradigm, even though there is no such thing as "normal society". In any case, it makes little sense to return to the "normal" that caused the disaster in the first place. After a disaster, we should be trying to do better, not return to the same mistakes that caused the disaster problems.

The "disaster cycle" is another bad but repeated idea. Our job should be to break out of the cycle so that a disaster does not happen. It should not be to go round the endless cycle, waiting and hoping for a disaster to complete the cycle.

The differentiation between slow-onset and rapid-onset disasters (as opposed to hazards) is frequently touted. Yet disasters result from vulnerability which is created and maintained over the long-term. Consequently, all disasters are slow-onset even when hazards (such as earthquakes and tornadoes) are rapid-onset.

Hazard return periods form the basis for many disaster-related policy decisions, even when recognising that it is a bad assumption that past hazard patterns will match future hazard patterns. Much disaster-related work has an intense focus on hazard return periods, rather than considering more thoroughly the work that implies vulnerability return periods. The latter points out that vulnerability requires decades or centuries to accrue before it is exposed in a disaster. Then, if we "return to normal", we re-start the vulnerability building process.

Another bad idea that continues to gain currency is that disasters will inevitably increase due to climate change. A quick literature search, or just some basic thinking, will demonstrate the fallaciousness of this statement. Since disasters require vulnerability to occur, it is far from inevitable that hazard alteration or augmentation, such as due to climate change, leads to more disasters.

In fact, it is expected that climate change will reduce the frequency and intensity of many hazards in many locations. As one example, increased precipitation is expected to mean fewer fires in northern boreal forests. Nevertheless, disasters could still increase if vulnerability increases.

This does not deny that climate change is a serious problem and must be addressed. It nevertheless accepts that the key challenge with disasters is not hazards but vulnerability. There is no point dealing with climate change to avoid certain changes in hazards, only to exacerbate vulnerability.

Paralleling the bad ideas that are repeated, I provide examples of common sense notions that have become famous and even acknowledged to specific authors. Phrases bandied about to sound intellectual and to develop academic careers are "social-ecological systems" (SES), "coupled human and natural systems" (CHANS), "adaptive management", and "panarchy".

The connection between and integration of society and the environment is a truism. Many (not all) indigenous societies have lived like that for millennia. The approach has even been firmly embedded in indigenous studies and anthropological literature for decades. We do not need SES or CHANS to tell us that.

As for “adaptive management”, good management by definition adapts and is flexible. That is not a new, innovative, or intelligent concept; it should be the basis of management. Finally, the word “panarchy” is claimed by certain authors to have been coined by them. A quick glance at a dictionary reveals that the word dates back to at least the nineteenth century.

Given this pattern of promoting bad ideas while stating the obvious, I would like to see how more effort could be put into learning the history of a field, acknowledging people who first and best generated certain ideas, and moving beyond truisms to understand fundamentals. To illustrate what we need, I have put together two examples of primers:

- <http://www.ilankelman.org/miscellany/DisasterLexicon.rtf>

- <http://www.ilankelman.org/fpp.pdf>

Corrections and additions to me are welcome. Please try to improve my work.

We have a long way to go, but we have the ability to get there. Will we?