

Report for Radix: Boulder, Colorado Hazards and Disasters Workshops 2007

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From 8-12 July 2007, I attended two meetings held in Boulder, Colorado: the “Annual Hazards Research and Applications Workshop” and the “Hazards and Disasters Researchers Meeting”, both run by the Natural Hazards Center at the University of Colorado. The Hazards Center staff deserve congratulations for their work in making the meeting as international and diverse as possible and for their impressive organisation which kept the meetings running smoothly.

At the Workshop, 400 attendees from fifteen countries represented academics, the private sector, government workers, non-governmental organisations, and international organisations including the United Nations. Disciplines covered sociology, engineering, emergency management, human and physical geography, insurance, several earth sciences, anthropology, international development, public health, and planning amongst many others. The large presence of students was encouraging. Nevertheless, there were plenty of examples illustrating how far the field has to go in understanding how to acknowledge and apply this diversity.

The panel on “Questioning the Effectiveness of Innovative Land Use Planning for Natural Hazards” had two American speakers and one New Zealand speaker. The American panellists and audience ignored the useful and different ideas which were presented from New Zealand, demonstrating limited interest in trying to place their American experience within wider contexts. Instead, they focused on minutiae within their own American state-based or locality-based backgrounds and immediately diverted any attempts to consider beyond their narrow scope. The New Zealand speaker was essentially sidelined throughout the session, despite having plenty to offer.

As well, students from one prominent academic provided polished and professional posters and presentations on applying GIS to vulnerability analysis, but the posters and presentations were devoid of content beyond the academic’s own work, thereby missing wider and deeper contexts about vulnerability. When an individual “educates” students about only their own work, especially when much better work exists on the same topic, they do a disservice to those students and they further perpetuate a cloistered and narrow-minded group of “experts” on a topic fundamental to disaster risk reduction endeavours. For example, in discussing GIS and hazards mitigation with one conference attendee, I hinted that there could be non-GIS techniques for mapping and displaying information. After some thought, the reply was: “I can’t think of anything better than GIS”.

Identified limitations of GIS include (a) the dominance of top-down (aerial) and to-scale views whereas oblique and non-scale views can have advantages and (b) delineating zones which start and stop abruptly when vulnerabilities, risks, and other characteristics are infrequently beholden to a narrow line. As well, while many cultures respond positively to visual information, other cultures rely less on visual outputs from others or expect to have visual displays presented with detailed oral descriptions or story telling. Rather than always providing a ready-made map or map-based product, desired breadth and depth of understanding might be better achieved by getting people to map and visualise information based on their own interests and approaches. That could involve tools ranging from GIS to a pen and paper to watercolours. GIS needs to be recognised as one tool amongst many within mapping and visualisation portfolios. The tool should be selected to fit the problem rather than the problem being defined on the basis of a single tool.

Another example of narrow views occurred during the Health Care Research and Disasters Roundtable. The discussion became so directed at what certain Americans were doing in certain American locations that I suggested that we might wish to consider experiences beyond our own locations because “there are other countries on this planet”. That generated a few laughs. Then, the discussion went back to what certain Americans were doing in certain American locations.

There were, though, many positive experiences. The panel on “Children and Youth in Disasters” was inspiring and ground-breaking. Many excellent research and practice suggestions were made, highlighting the advantages and disadvantages of field work, proposing ways to extend the work in this area, and setting the stage for the founding of a Children, Youth, and Disasters Network. The speakers were focused, addressed key issues, and responded superbly to questions. Of particular importance was the number of examples presented about initiatives taken by and creativity shown by children and youth with respect to disaster risk reduction, irrespective of guidance or support which adults and authorities had or had not provided. As per the title of a recent report on disaster risk reduction education, all ages have plenty to teach other ages in order to make disaster risk reduction education a collaborative exchange.

The Gender and Disasters Roundtable also yielded detailed discussion, helpful insights, and several initiatives to move forward on this topic. Examples were further contributions to and dissemination of the “Gender & Disaster Sourcebook” and ideas for further including and promoting gender in disaster risk reduction efforts around the world.

The three plenary sessions covering Gilbert White, the work of the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, and vulnerability were excellent. The speakers were impressive, describing interesting material followed by good responses and discussion from the audience. But all that was swept away in the final plenary comprising a single presentation about a disaster risk reduction program in southern California. The program was presented as a top-down, quantitative, technocratic, hazard-first-vulnerability-second approach based on mainly southern California experience. Why was the rest of the conference, including the other plenaries, not relevant?

During the vulnerability plenary, I had suggested that, in parallel with the standard all-hazards ethos, perhaps we should consider developing an all-vulnerabilities approach to disaster risk reduction. That did not seem to influence those at the conference, including the final presenter, who continued to promote the need for all-hazards mitigation plans as the predominant disaster risk reduction challenge. So yet again, we seek to control nature by mitigating hazards. Who is left to reduce vulnerability?—meaning that any extreme event which strikes causes few problems rather than being anthropomorphized into a hazard because society cannot deal with it.

Despite these examples, numerous opportunities existed for any attendee to provide material, to run sessions, and to make comments regarding one’s own experience and views. Yet the parochialism witnessed was disappointing because, even when possibilities to enquire about or to learn from non-traditional approaches were available, they were frequently brushed aside. A dominating feeling was that many Americans still viewed the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and Hurricanes Katrina and Rita as being the most important disaster events ever, even though they are relatively small and unimportant by international and historical standards.

The workshops were still rewarding due to the minority of attendees, Americans and non-Americans, who were willing to embrace the world, to explore new insights, and to move well beyond their own cultural and disciplinary backgrounds. The organisers deserve kudos for providing that opportunity and for presenting some of the best which exists for disaster risk reduction, especially across the USA. As representative of the field’s current state, especially in the USA, that also showed how far we have yet to go.

Based on the plenary panellists’ answers to questions, perhaps we shall find the pathway we seek by never forgetting four characteristics which defined Gilbert White: intelligence, patience, persistence, and humility.