

People and politics in the aftermath of floods

By Catherine Butler and Kate Walker-Springett

Floods are both a private and public affair. They are debated vociferously within media and other public fora, and public institutions have direct responsibilities for their management. But the experience of flooding is also deeply private, bringing the destruction of our most personal artefacts, our photographs and memories, our homes, our security. Too often perhaps the public debate subsumes and obscures the personal experience, dehumanising and erasing the loss of livelihoods and quality of life that flooding can bring, both at the time of the flood and after during the long and traumatic recovery process. Though the real meaning of flooding for people's lives is central to understanding what needs to be done to address floods, all too often it is left out of policy and political discussion.

Experience of flooding is highly variable and differentiated across places, communities, and individuals. This creates complications in designing and delivering the best possible solutions, which are likely to be place and person specific, particularly for those that are at high risk but do not qualify for government funded flood defences. For those with experience of flooding, long-term 'solutions' are likely to mean more than reparation after a flood has happened; such processes are known to be highly stressful and protracted even for those best prepared and are inappropriate for a future where flooding is more commonplace. In this context, the development and implementation of measures that can attune to local experiences and needs, and ensure that capabilities to live life are not diminished over long periods, is likely to be important for the creation of truly resilient communities

Several social analyses have highlighted that the periods of flux following major flood events are precisely the times when openings arise for the creation and enactment of measures for ensuring flood resistance and resilience. However, these are also times of heightened stress which tends to manifest in frustrated and highly charged contestation and confrontations between those affected and those in positions of authority. The limited inclusion of voices from those affected both at these times and in the processes of review that follow contributes to such frustrations and can mean that the subtleties and nuances across different perspectives, which are so important to developing the most appropriate responses, are frequently lost. Moreover, the focus for government and for those flooded is understandably on getting things 'back to normal', leaving little space for longer-term planning and for the development of important relationships that could see flood affected communities contribute more strongly to on-going public and political debates.

The inclusion of flood affected publics' knowledge and perspectives in long-term planning and policy making is not just important in ensuring appropriate and locally situated solutions that work for people in particular places. It concerns the social contract between people and government, and the unspoken reciprocal relations of responsibility that underpin our expectations about what should be done, and by whom, in response to floods. The expectations that emerge about personal and government responsibility with respect to flooding need to be negotiated with future change to climate and increased likelihood of flood events in the UK. An open dialogue between government and flood affected communities could allow room for such negotiation as risks and predictability change, and encourage greater levels of understanding between those in flood management roles and communities devastated by flood events.

Ultimately, it is people both as individuals and communities that should be at the heart of flood risk policies, and whilst the flood waters recede after a few weeks or at worst a few months, the impacts are long-standing. The most recent major flood event during the winter of 2013/14 is perhaps an opportunity to mediate our attitudes towards the goals of flood risk management, moving away from a 'return to normality', towards a more adaptable approach which allows those at risk of flooding the range of resources necessary to contribute to the development of solutions that can ensure their resilience into the future.

Biographies

Catherine Butler is an Advanced Research Fellow in environment and sustainability at University of Exeter with a background in social sciences. Her research examines the roles of publics, the state, and private institutions in societal processes that have implications for socio-environmental sustainability. She is currently Principle Investigator on two major RCUK funded grants examining different dimensions of policy relating to climate change.

http://geography.exeter.ac.uk/staff/index.php?web_id=Catherine_Butler

Kate Walker-Springett is an environmental social scientist, currently based in the Geography department at the University of Exeter. Her research focuses on the ways in which different publics engage with environmental issues, with a particular interest in climate change impacts in aquatic environments. http://geography.exeter.ac.uk/staff/index.php?web_id=Kate_Walker-Springett