Perceptions, power and politics: building communities’ resilience to climate change in Vanuatu, South Pacific

Ainka Granderson∗†1,2, Simon Batterbury1, and Rodney Keenan1

1University of Melbourne - School of Land and Environment (MSLE) – The University of Melbourne
221 Bouverie Street Parkville, VIC, 3010, Australia
2Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) – CSIRO Enquiries Bag 10
Clayton South VIC 3169, Australia

Abstract

The role of social capital and learning in building communities’ resilience to climate change is increasingly emphasized. Yet, the wider cultural and political dimensions shaping understandings of climate risk and adaptive capacity as well as local governance processes remain relatively unexamined. We critically examine two projects to build resilience to climate change within rural communities in Vanuatu, South Pacific using a cultural-political approach. Climate change is projected to impact significantly agriculture, fisheries and freshwater resources in Vanuatu with higher temperatures, greater rainfall variability and intensity, ocean acidification and sea level rise. We unpack the multiple knowledges, meanings and interests attached to building resilience to these risks and how these are translated into actions ”on the ground” across various stakeholders and scales. Our research exposes tensions between community versus external understandings of climate risk and adaptive capacity, and how particular understandings can undermine local agency. It highlights issues of power and politics in engaging and enabling rural communities to build their resilience as well as a significant gap in governance at the sub-national level. Our research also brings to the forefront the scalar politics defining interactions between situated versus scientific knowledges, rural versus urban, and the local versus global. We argue for greater engagement with cultural and political dimensions, and more broadly the interpretive social sciences, in resilience scholarship. We also call for a renewed focus on participatory processes that enable meaningful, multi-stakeholder dialogue and support effective planning, implementation and learning across scales to build resilience to climate change.

Keywords: adaptation to climate change, adaptive capacity, community engagement, cross scale, governance, power, resilience

∗Speaker
†Corresponding author: ainkag@gmail.com