



# What is going wrong with community engagement? How flood communities and flood authorities construct engagement and partnership working



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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we discuss the need for flood risk management in England that engages stakeholders with flooding and its management processes, including knowledge gathering, planning and decision-making. By comparing and contrasting how flood communities experience ‘community engagement’ and ‘partnership working’, through the medium of an online questionnaire, with the process’s and ways of working that the Environment Agency use when ‘working with others’, we demonstrate that flood risk management is caught up in technocratic ways of working derived from long-standing historical practices of defending agricultural land from water. Despite the desire to move towards more democratised ways of working which enable an integrated approach to managing flood risk, the technocratic framing still pervades contemporary flood risk management. We establish that this can disconnect society from flooding and negatively impacts the implementation of more participatory approaches designed to engage flood communities in partnership working.

Through the research in this paper it becomes clear that adopting a stepwise, one-size-fits-all approach to engagement fails to recognise that communities are heterogenous and that good engagement requires gaining an understanding of the social dimensions of a community. Successful engagement takes time, effort and the establishment of trust and utilises social learning and pooling of knowledge to create a better understanding of flooding, and that this can lead to increasing societal connectivity to flooding and its impacts.

## 1. Introduction

Flooding is a multi-dimensional systemic risk (Renn et al., 2011) embedded in other societal processes (Evers et al., 2016) such as transport, health, education, food production, drinking water provision, ecosystem services and so on. It is fraught with uncertainty and ambiguity (Renn et al., 2011; Aronica et al., 2013) which necessitates a holistic, that is an integrated approach, to ensure that all elements of the risk are managed as effectively and efficiently as possible. For flood risk management to be deemed successful it also needs to include increasing societal awareness of, and preparedness for, flooding alongside helping society to build greater resilience to flooding (Geaves and Penning-Rowsell, 2015). It is through engaging society with managing flooding that these outcomes can be attained.

In this paper we discuss the need for flood risk management ways of working that engage stakeholders through partnership working, including knowledge gathering, planning and decision-making. However,

we demonstrate that the terms ‘engagement’ and ‘partnership working’ are themselves fraught with uncertainty and ambiguity and are constructed differently by the various stakeholders of flood risk management. We seek to understand these different constructions and provide a more united framing of engagement and partnership working which can then be embedded into both policy and practice through a combination of top down and bottom up processes.

By comparing and contrasting the experiences of flood communities being ‘engaged’ by the flood authorities with the approaches that the Environment Agency use when ‘working with others’, we gain an understanding of how flood risk management has come to be framed within a technocratic paradigm. We then move on to examine why a more democratic paradigm is critical to the engagement of communities and the development of partnership working.

We finish by unpacking the problems encountered when endeavouring to adopt more democratised ways of working: the impact that knowledge hierarchies have on flood communities; the problems

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associated with adopting a stepwise, one-size-fits-all process to engagement; and the consequences of not taking the necessary time to build the trust required to make partnership working successful.

### 1.1. The reframing of flood risk management: from a technocratic to democratic paradigm

For centuries, humans have fought to reclaim land from the control of water. Protecting lowlands with river embankments, drying out potential farmland via field drainage and creating vast networks of drains to enable wetlands to become viable for agriculture (Werritty, 2006; Scrase and Sheate, 2005). Land reclamation was a battle between land owners and water, to defend the soils and turn them into productive food generating landscapes (Purseglove, 2015) and feed an ever-growing population. Managing water was set in a paradigm of technocratic flood defence.

The advent of World War 2 necessitated the UK to become more self-sufficient in the production of food (Tunstall et al., 2004). This led to intensification in agricultural production and further changes to the flood landscape through modification of land management practices, increasing land drainage and more reclamation of land from the waters (O'Connell et al., 2007; Wheater and Evans, 2009; Marshall et al., 2014). This all bolstered the framing of a defensive approach to managing flooding achieved by utilising a centralist and technocratic approach with limited input from the public. Such an approach failed to accommodate the opinions of the communities it impacted nor their historic use of the land (Purseglove, 2015).

The practice of protecting agricultural land through flood defence continued until a series of flood events in the late 1940s and early 1950s challenged the premise of what should be defended. Flooding in the Fens in 1947 (Wainwright, 2007), in Lynmouth in 1952 (McGinnigle, 2002; Hill, 2015) and severe coastal flooding in 1953 (killing over 300 people) (Scrase and Sheate, 2005; Lumbroso and Vinet, 2011) initiated the reframing of flood defence; from defending agricultural land to defending property and keeping people safe (Donaldson et al., 2013; Nye et al., 2011). This reactive reframing (Tunstall et al., 2004) did not, however, alter the underlying paradigm of flood defence. If anything, it strengthened the centralist and technocratic 'flood defence' response.

Flood defence became predicated on the institutional construction of hard engineering solutions designed to defend towns and cities against the rising flood waters. This 'defence' was framed in terms of 'sovereignty' (Donaldson et al., 2013) where government determines flood risk management policy and what constitutes 'public good' in the face of flooding. This approach effectively removes society from flooding. It abstracts communities and other stakeholders from the actions taken towards managing flood risk (Tapsell et al., 2002) and protecting their homes and livelihoods. Those living at risk of flooding became, in essence, passive observers, with flood risk authorities acting on their behalf.

The 1980's and 1990's saw the beginning in a shift away from the paradigm of flood defence moving towards one of flood risk management (McEwen et al., 2017). The emphasis on protecting urban environments was further increased as over production of food and increased access to global markets (Tunstall et al., 2004) reduced the perception of the need to defend agricultural land from flood waters. Increased computer power, advancing models and the beginnings of the understanding of the impact that flood defence techniques had on the environment all led to seeking a more integrated approach to flood risk management. Embedded within this new paradigm was the requirement for society to take responsibility for managing individual flood exposure, for example, creating flood plans or making homes more flood resistant and resilient. Flood communities were no longer to be abstracted from managing flooding but rather abruptly immersed into the process. Thus 'community engagement' started to play an important role within flood risk management.

In 2004, echoing the Netherlands's approach of 'Room for the Rivers' (Netherlands, 2012), Defra published 'Making Space for Water' (Defra, 2004) which further developed the concept of flood risk management. The challenge now faced by the flood authorities in England was to move their approach to managing flooding away from historic technocratic and top down ways of working, arising from taking a flood defence approach, towards more inclusive democratised approaches (McDaniels et al., 1999). 'Engaging the community into the decisions made about managing flooding' was the objective (Landström et al., 2011), and this tended to play out as the flood authorities endeavouring to make communities make themselves more resistant and resilient to flooding. Through taking a top down approach deployed without using two-way communication there could be little understanding of what 'engaging the community into the decisions' meant to 'the community'.

### 1.2. Moving towards 'good' engagement: effective flood risk management

We acknowledged earlier that flooding is a systemic risk embedded within society (Renn et al., 2011; McDaniels et al., 1999), it is a wicked problem (Horst and Webber, 1973). Managing such a complex problem necessitates the generation of an exhaustive understanding of the sources, pathways, impacts and societal elements of flooding, in order to generate an understanding of what solutions could be developed to address it. Participatory processes and partnership working can create the environment in which this exhaustive understanding can be developed. It is through combining different domains of knowledge and through alterations to decision-making processes using collaborative approaches (Löschner et al., 2016), that flood partnerships have the potential to create more effective flood risk management responses. Engaging all flood stakeholders creates a degree of knowledge overlap which strengthens the process potentially yielding more impactful outputs (Löschner et al., 2016).

The realisation of co-creating flood risk management solutions ultimately depends on the capacity of the different actors and groups involved in partnership working to communicate, learn, negotiate and reach collective decisions (Muro and Jeffrey, 2008). This is initiated by the development of a shared understanding of the local flooding situation through combining knowledge and experience which ultimately can lead to enhanced connectivity with flooding and the creation of the resilience and resistance that society requires to withstand it (Frijns et al., 2013). This is a form of social learning and is being increasingly used in environmental problem solving (Johansson et al., 2013). Here social learning is centred on developing relationships and trust, both of which take time and perseverance (Johansson et al., 2013).

The move towards more democratised ways of working has been stilted by the tendency to hold onto old ways of working, with the paradigm of a technocratic response retaining the psychological upper hand as evidenced in this research. When engagement is set in the shadow of technocratic ways of working, 'being heard' becomes a central problem for flood communities (Thaler and Levin-Keitel, 2016). A frequently heard lament at flood group conferences, workshops and forums and within this research is that flood risk management continues to be something that is being "done" to flood communities rather than "with" them [respondent:115]. This lament is set against changes in the way the flood authorities work. For example, the Environment Agency has recently employed a number of Engagement Officers. Whilst the flood authorities are endeavouring to engage the community, communities fail to see these activities as them 'being engaged'. Within this paper we argue that the constructions of 'engagement' differs between flood communities and flood authorities, which creates this discord.

### 1.3. Moving towards 'good' engagement: appreciating that communities are heterogeneous

Having established that good community engagement is beneficial

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