

SEI Asia Podcast Series: Environment and Policy in Asia

Episode 11: Critiquing knowledge co-production in disaster risk reduction

By Rajesh Daniel, Dayoon Kim and Minh Tran

00:06 - 00:32

Welcome to SEI Asia's podcast on environment and policy in Asia. In this podcast series, we invite experts to discuss the many critical and complex environmental challenges in Asia, and how to find solutions through policy and partnerships.

00:33 – 00:51

Rajesh: Welcome Minh and Dayoon to this edition of Environment and Policy in Asia Podcast series. Today, we want to talk with you about co-production of knowledge.

This is in light of your recent paper “Co-production revisited: from knowledge plurality to action for disaster risk reduction”

00:52 – 01:07

Rajesh: In this episode, we don't want to look into the paper as such, but we wanted to explore your own reflections from working in this field, looking at co-production.

And when you say revisit it, obviously there's a critique involved. Look at what your critiques are and figure out how better co-production can be done in terms of Disaster Risk Reduction. How does it sound?

01:08 – 01:09

Minh: I'm excited.

01:10 – 01:24

Rajesh: Excellent. Thanks. First, let's start with your own interests and motivation. Could you tell us, as co-authors of this paper? What makes you interested in knowledge coproduction? Over to you, Dayoon, what about you?

01:25 – 02:01

Dayoon: So I guess I will go first. The interest comes from maybe some of the things that [a] lot of our partners have been sharing. When I was involved in the projects with environmental defenders and that is not just one motivation but more like inspiration and energy. We are just trying to find our ways to work in a way that we don't feel shameful.

02:02 – 02:04

Rajesh: It's interesting. Over to you Minh.

02:05 – 02:34

Minh: Yeah, I think I agree and I share a lot of that with Dayoon just the experience of encountering a lot of different lived experiences and perspectives during our work and all of this kind of boiled down to the question of whose knowledge matters for us. I hope I could speak for both of us on that question of whose and which type of knowledge counts really when we talk about science and science to policy.

02:35 – 03:11

Minh: I was thinking about this earlier this morning and I kind of had a reflection if I could share a story. So I always thought growing up in kind of an “unscientific” family where my mom, a Vietnamese would always have certain beliefs about the things that we should do, food that we should eat at which time during the day, what to drink, when we first wake up, what not to do when you first wake up, for example and one of the things that I always fight with her about is when you take a shower.

03:12 – 03:46

Minh: So she had this thing where she would always tell me not to take a shower during the middle of the day, like at noon or at the middle of the night. And for me, that's just ridiculous. Like, why is it there? Why can I not shower when I want to? Right. And for every single thing that she told us there'd be a story behind it, and there'd be reasoning. For the showering thing, it's that the hour of the day so we believe in spirits, right? And there would be ...

03:47 – 04:16

Minh: I don't know how to translate this like the boss of the spirits would be going around and checking on all of us. So if you're showering at that time, that's not a good thing and they're going to capture you or do something to you which is to me, I was always questioning my mom. Why did you work so hard to get me into school and get me educated and then expect me to believe in these kind of unscientific things.

04:17 – 04:48

Minh: But more recently I became curious about traditional Chinese medicine, which has a big impact on the Vietnamese as medicinal practices as well, and I learned that in traditional Chinese medicine there are certain organs within our body that may or may not align with the western body systems and at specific hours of the day, that's when certain organs would be resting or recalibrating themselves.

04:49 – 05:01

Minh: It's different from Western medicine. It's also based on years and years and generations of observation, of testing, of understanding our body and how our body works.

05:02 – 05:29

Minh: Sorry, mom! She wasn't necessarily wrong, but it just a different way of knowing our body, different knowledge system in that kind of brings me back to a lot of our work as that Dayoon mentioned we would encounter indigenous peoples and their knowledge, local communities who may

have a different experience of things and through those experiences developed different knowledge systems.

05:30 – 05:48

Minh: And then when we talk about disaster and climate change, which of that knowledge counts? And which does not get counted and what are the implications of that and that was why I'm very interested in the politics of knowledge and in co-production in this space. That's a long story.

05:49 – 06:05

Rajesh: It actually tells us a lot about where your motivation comes from. This is important that you're reflecting on not just your work, but also your experience growing up because those are the things that I guess condition us and help us look at the world.

06:06 – 06:19

Rajesh: Dayoon, what about you? Did you have any particular experiences or stories that you think as kind of an AHA moment where you said, I really need to figure this part of knowledge and knowledge co-production.

06:20 – 07:04

Dayoon: If you ask me about one story or one experience. I cannot really pinpoint just one, it's just like it's been a lot of the engagements that I had since my college years until SEI have led me to be interested in the topic and we want to see things a bit more differently from the usual ways of working in our organization or in our space [in] development and academia.

07:05 – 07:39

Dayoon: Maybe one thing that I want to see through this is to find these spaces where we listen to the stories from the people, including like local and indigenous people, and a lot of the environmental defenders in the region, scholar activists and the organizations to really share the important stories from different contexts. I can just share that briefly.

07:40 – 08:19

Rajesh: In your paper, you also said that you are drawing from your own insights and reflections as a researcher in the field of climate change and disaster and it is fairly obvious from not just your paper, but the literature in the field is that there are things that are going missing when it comes into local knowledge and perceptions. Like Minh was saying that there are different ways of knowing and there are different ways of understanding. And yet these seem to not make it into knowledge or efforts in DRR. Tell us what are these gaps, and why do they matter?

08:20 – 09:09

Dayoon: I think the acknowledgement on the needs and perspective of the local knowledge is pretty prevalent in a lot of the policy discussions and international frameworks so a lot of the DRR frameworks, the climate change or governance in general, they would talk about the needs and engagement with the

local knowledge. So there is a wide acknowledgement there, but there are, you know, existing structures in place in terms of, yes, academia, collecting certain types of knowledge and validating these knowledges as more scientific.

09:10 – 09:30

Dayoon: And we talked about this in our paper “research excellency”. It's something that marginalizes [a] lot of spaces for local knowledge to actually be counted and be considered important and relevant.

09:31 – 09:32

Rajesh: Over to you Minh. What do you think?

09:33 – 10:25

Minh: Yeah, I totally agree. I think especially in the realm of disaster and climate policy increasingly, we see that participation and inclusion are being emphasized, written into policy documents, commitments of governments at different level. I mean that's great progress and we're not discounting that progress being made through the efforts of many different actors and stakeholders recognizing that climate change and Disaster Risk Reduction are complex issues, that doesn't just involve policymakers, doesn't just involve the one monitoring hazard or the scientist or the modeler sitting somewhere in academic institutes, but it's the effort of a lot of different people, and that's increasingly being recognized.

10:26 – 11:18

Minh: One thing I want to add to that is the question of timing of participation and inclusion. I think in a lot of cases in a lot of contexts that we're working on, we see it's happening at the implementation level, so there's a policy or there is a project designed and you invite people to implement the policy or to implement the project.

What we want to emphasize through the paper is that it's important that these different voices, these different ways of knowing and understanding, should be taken into account before the policy is designed and before the project is designed.

11:19 – 11:38

Minh: And that's allowing and most importantly, communities, people, groups of people that are often marginalized, that are often left behind to be able to have not just a say, but also power and influence over what is the agenda.

11:39 – 12:02

Rajesh: Excellent. This quite nicely leads us to co-production because we seem to be in a scenario where, as you say, there is acceptance that local knowledge matters, that it should be integrated, that they're making attempts to do it. Sometimes it's flawed, sometimes it's at the implementation level. And of course, we recognize the progress that's made.

12:03 – 12:23

Rajesh: But then we come to this tricky part called co-production. And before we look into what co-production's flaws are, can you just tell us from your own views when you say co-production of knowledge. What is it? Explain to us what in your view, what would be co-production of knowledge?

12:24 – 12:44

Dayoon: So actually in our paper, we did talk about how it's not just co-production of knowledge that we are looking into [but] that co-production as a broader sense of approach and perspective can be applied from the knowledge into the action.

12:45 – 13:16

Dayoon: And of course, there has been efforts by different scholars talking about how co-production can go beyond just knowledge space, but really to find its meaningful benefits for the communities, where it's not just creation of knowledge, but the knowledge has to change and lead to the action that can be beneficial for the community and for the local people.

13:17 – 13:20

Rajesh: And Minh, do you have anything to add or clarify?

13:21 – 14:04

Minh: I just want to repeat Dayoon and emphasize that we see coproduction as a process of generating actionable knowledge that is done or led by the people that it's meant to help and it's meant to be taken upon by, whether it's certain groups of people on the ground, whether it's the government, whether it's civil society actors elsewhere, whoever we the research or the initiatives target. And they should be part of the process of generating knowledge. And it's not just the researchers or the academics.

14:05 – 14:30

Rajesh: Thank you. That's excellent because then this opens up co-production nicely for our next question because clearly co-production is not just creation of knowledge, it's not just getting into a community, having a meeting and coming back with the notes [or] possibly writing up a report. There is more as what both of you have emphasized is actionable knowledge that is action to benefit.

14:31 – 14:48

Rajesh: Co-production leaves unchallenged assumptions about research participation. Inequalities and power relations inform who participates in the research and how participation is formulated. And this is something that we should get into because both of you have also talked of power.

14:48 – 15:12

Rajesh: Tell us what this challenge means, because this seems to be essential challenge to how co-production is viewed and used. And as you said, maybe not benefiting. How do you view this challenge of power and representation, and how can it be taken up? As usual, reflect from your own experiences is what I would encourage.

15:13 – 16:16

Dayoon: So in terms of instrumental co-production, it's something that Minh mentioned earlier regarding the participation taking place maybe in a way that includes the language of participatory meetings and stakeholder engagement. Where this type of co-production focused on how the knowledge is produced with different stakeholders, how they're involved in this process and how that can be used in the agenda set in this program. But if as Minh said, if the motives, if the needs and if the benefit-sharing mechanisms are not discussed in the beginning by, and led by, the local and indigenous communities, these knowledge production process won't be able to fully benefit and sometimes may lead to unexpected outcomes.

16:17 – 16:56

Dayoon: The topics of representation and power are not just important for climate and disaster spaces, but it's important everywhere. And we think about how instrumental co-production that we mentioned in our paper is making these languages of participation and stakeholder engagement as if it's an apolitical term. But it's very politically charged terms and it is coming from those motives that are politically charged.

16:57 – 17:40

Dayoon: What we also want to emphasize how we need to engage with that political function of co-production and in the sense that how power is affecting the disaster, scholarship or disaster research, we can find it from the definition of disaster itself like how do who defines what disaster, who said what is disaster? Where is disaster? How do people pinpoint certain disasters that it is taking place, or it will take place.

17:41 – 18:23

Dayoon: There we see a lot of a physical impact that is often highlighted and often more of a sudden onset type of disasters. Some environmental defenders that I was lucky enough to engage with, they have mentioned that policies by the governments and a lot of the development projects that encroach on their land and water is part of what they think is a disaster.

18:24 – 18:37

Rajesh: That's excellent, Dayoon. Thank you. The whole definition of disaster needs to be questioned and who defines it, as you say. Any reflections from you Minh on power and representation?

18:38 – 19:5 6

Minh: I think the question of assumptions about power and representation within the paradigm of participation needs to be thought through. And I say that with the understanding and the

acknowledgement that it's not an easy thing to do. I think in a lot of cases because local participation or the participation of local communities is being recognized and being sort of a trend, that's when we work at the household level, for example, the head of household is invited to the table in [a] certain society or community, that might be the husband, in others, it might be the wife. Obviously within the same community, people of different genders have different experiences and ways of understanding.

And not recognizing that or not acknowledging that in the process of designing the participatory approach means that we could easily leave out different perspectives and voices.

19:57 – 20:08

Rajesh: You have in your paper said there's a need to acknowledge political realities as much as co-production, not just talk of co-production in itself.

20:09 – 20:40

Dayoon: For me, the paper was more of a reflection. I want to think more about the topics of production, power and knowledge in a way that I can find ways to engage with this process a bit better.

20:41 – 21:10

Dayoon: What are the different bodies of knowledge that is considered important and who are saying that? Why don't we find ways where more grounded knowledge and perspectives are also presented as important and crucial for disaster scholarship and beyond.

21:11 – 21:45

Dayoon: Secondly, it's to really surface some of the barriers where this type of knowledges are more marginalized over the others. What's considered scientific knowledge is very much dependent upon the measurements and [that is] where a lot of the voices and the experiences of the people on the ground is lost through those numbers.

21:46 – 22:13

Dayoon: It really goes down to how these projects are designed and how this research is designed. What is considered more academically feasible and valuable? Who wants to fund these kinds of research and programs?

22:14 – 23:11

Dayoon: Last but not least, what we said in the beginning is we want to talk about co-production, where it's not just co-production of knowledge, but it's also about action. This is also where we tried to find how the knowledge doesn't stay as some words or paragraphs in the paper or report or program document, but it really translates into could be the local level policies or could be formation of a coalition, strengthening of an existing group of people who have been working on this issue. Those were the points that we wanted to emphasize through the paper.

23:12 – 23:41

Dayoon: And broadly, I think we wanted this to be a conversation starter for us and different scholars in the field. I'm interested in how we can find ways to really challenge some of the dynamics within our research that seems to be not talked about and try to find ways to work better in this field.

23:42 – 24:17

Minh: Thanks Dayoon for already doing the hard work and the hard job of putting forward the key messages that we want to share through the paper. I could share one of the motivations for me to engage really in this conversation. As you mentioned, that's really the foundation of the paper is just to reflect on our experience as researchers, and for me, that's one particular project that I recently did looking at policy coherence across the different sustainable development goals.

24:18 – 24:51

Minh: It was a project that we are tasked with looking at policy coherence and interactions across these different sectors in the context of climate change and disasters, and in the Mekong Delta and Vietnam. Obviously, we went into the project with this definition of sustainable development according to the UN, to the SDGs to gender 2013 but what we encounter was a completely different definition of sustainable development, and not just one.

24:52 – 25:34

Minh: For example, some of the people that we interacted with, sustainable development meant having a job that lasts and an income that lasts. That's all that matters before anything else, before we talk about the environment, before we talk about other responsibilities or the definition of disasters where for a lot of the people who experience flood and droughts on an annual basis, hazards are still not the most disastrous thing to them, but rather it's the economic system. It's the marketing system that's making their livelihood challenging.

25:35 – 26:13

Minh: That really reminded me or led me to question then if I had, if we had designed the project around these definitions of sustainable development of disasters, it would have perhaps been a completely different project. The outcomes and the findings would have been totally different and that's why I think co-production of action and knowledge is so important because it has the power when it is done in a way that acknowledges power dynamics and representation at different levels.

26:14 – 26:52

Minh: It has the power to ensure that research is being done in a responsible and meaningful way for the people that we serve. I guess I do feel a bit ashamed of the work that we did just thinking about how we approach sustainable development and how that really left out a lot of the other priorities and agendas that were silenced through the process and we can only hope that there'll be less shame involved in the future.

26:53 – 27:01

Rajesh: I just want one last bit I can add earlier. You know Thai Baan, right? Local research and local knowledge production, what are your thoughts on that?

27:02 – 27:34

Minh: We didn't mention this before, but we do have to acknowledge that co-production is not something new, it's not something fancy that only researchers can do, and it has been practiced in many contexts. And that's why thinking beyond co-production of knowledge is important because in practice, in many communities on the ground, it has been done for generations and I think Thai Baan is one of the examples.

27:35 – 28:14

Minh: And that's there again, whose knowledge matters? Whose knowledge counts, right? Because if that kind of science and knowledge production is now being framed as you know, participation, local production, UN quote as something new as the new agenda as something novel then we are clearly failing to acknowledge that there are many knowledge systems out there that have been practicing it in different ways and we're just not aware or not recognizing or not counting those systems.

28:15 – 28:16

Rajesh: Excellent.

28:17 – 29:12

Dayoon: Within our paper, we did talk about how we hope that deeper and more reflexive type of co-production can question and challenge the existing assumptions that marginalize one's knowledge over others. And what can be like try to surface that barrier in the knowledge production processes and here I think in terms of the research, we can see where different finances, different standards and power relations and terminologies used within disaster studies or disaster programs can be challenged and can be reshaped.

29:13 – 29:46

Dayoon: That goes back to defenders who really tries to surface what they are experiencing not just by the climate change and environmental degradation, but also different types of marginalization and oppression by the society, by the governments, and by the private sector that encroach on their land. We think there are so much potential for these types of engagement to be part of the resistance.

29:47 – 30:40

Minh: I want to come back to a key and important aspect of co-production is the recognition that who we are in the world influences how we experience it and how we see it. Obviously, we've been talking about power and power dynamics and when we talk about power, we have to talk about resistance. And a lot of the experience of the indigenous movement of environmental defenders as well as a lot of

different groups of people that are actively challenging the system, resisting the oppression that they are experiencing which is an important function of how disaster risk and vulnerability are produced.

30:40 – 31:18

Minh: But being in the position of resistance also influences how they experience, how they see the world and that means there is knowledge and wisdom coming out of those lived experiences as well and that makes it also a distinct kind of knowledge that's important to take into consideration. If we really see climate change and disaster issues as complex political, developmental and socioeconomic issues.

31:19 – 32:27

Dayoon: I think it was really good that you pointed out where there is power, there is resistance and something that goes back to earlier discussion of the hierarchies between different knowledges.

So we talked about the existing structures in place that really marginalize one thought over the other. And it's the same structure that creates the power and marginalization of people over one group of people over the other. It's actually the same core structure, in a way that if we are talking about co-production, it always needs to go beyond just knowledge. It always needs to go into the actions and how people are engaging with their daily lives and political systems in their given settings. It always needs to touch that.

32:28 – 32:38

Rajesh: Brilliant, I think we can wrap up there. In this podcast, we've covered a lot of ground. If you want recap or say something that you missed or if you think you should have said something better, go ahead.

32:39 – 33:11

Dayoon: But well honestly, I kind of wanted this to be a bit more of a jolly conversation, but it got too dark. Why am I doing this? I get inspired by the people who have voiced their opinions and people whose voices and knowledge and experiences are not considered in the policy and academic spheres just because of the standards that these spaces set and the types of exclusions that it creates.

33:12 – 33:45

Dayoon: So what kinds of like engagement or what kinds of processes that takes place in the future work that I do is just really supporting the people who are on the ground that have that knowledge, experience and cause they want to share. I think that's really enough for me to say that's where my shame will be reduced. That's the only thing that I want to do and going forward so.

33:46 – 34:37

Minh: We talked a lot about politicizing or re-politicizing co-production and participation. But I have to acknowledge that it's not an easy thing to do. It's very difficult. It's not just difficult because of the

academic structure or the funding structures or some of those systematic issues that we've been talking about that's making it hard within the context of research work that we're doing but it's also challenging particularly if we take into account our positionality and who we are as researchers with the background that we have with certain privilege that we have as well.

34:38 – 35:30

Minh: What does it mean to respect the local knowledge of the local agency of a local partner that will work with for instance when maybe they don't necessarily agree with our way of seeing these hierarchies or systems of knowledge. Maybe they do not necessarily agree or see or recognize the value of lived experience being a legitimate source of knowledge or data or wisdom then how do we respect or how do we work or collaborate meaningfully in that case, do we insist on our ways of understanding? Do we take a step back? I think we eventually come down to building trust and a working relationship.

35:31 – 35:59

Minh: A relationship that's safe and comfortable enough for us to be able to talk through these things and arrive at a mutual understanding. But again, it's not going to happen within a single research project. It might not happen within my own career, but I agree with Dayoon, we have to look, continue to look out for inspirations, lessons and opportunities to reflect and do as best as we can. That's certain.

36:00 – 36:15

Rajesh: Thank you. I really liked this podcast. I think it was very reflective and heartfelt and I think I learned a lot about you two as well today and what you do and what you want to do and your passions. Thank you so much, Dayoon and Minh.

36:16 – 36:18

Dayoon and Minh: Thank you.

36:18 – 36:45

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