

Rebuffing the ‘hard to reach’ narrative: how to engage diverse groups in participation for resilience

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ABSTRACT

Across three years (2017-2020), the ESRC Seminar series, ‘Civil Agency, Society and Climate Adaptation to Weather Extremes’ (CASCADE-NET) critically examined the changing role of civil society in extreme weather adaptation. One full-day seminar explored “less heard voices” within Civil Society, considering ways of engaging diverse groups in resiliency, knowledge exchange, and capacity building. A small interdisciplinary group from the seminar followed up with a roundtable discussion, conducted online, discussing first who the less-heard voices in society are, and how labels, such as ‘vulnerable’ and ‘hard-to-reach’, might need to be reappraised, and concluding that it is often those in power who make themselves ‘hard-to-reach’ and who fail to listen. The group then discussed how deeper engagement with citizens and communities can be achieved through improved relationships and networks. Finally, the roundtable discussed how the succession of crises affecting the UK (and other settings) could, paradoxically, present an opportune moment to press the case for a more joined-up and inclusive civil society. The concluding section summarises key insights from the roundtable and identifies opportunities to rethink engagement with ‘hard to reach’ groups. To answer our question of ‘how to’ engage diverse groups, we conclude with the action points to change the orientation of the powerful to (i) be genuinely open to listening to, and acting upon the voices of less heard groups; (ii) listen on the terms of groups who are voicing their experience, rather than force them into pre-arranged consultation formats; (iii) engage early, widely and frequently; (iv) build trust by demonstrating willingness to listen, through actions; (v) tackle historical mistrust, unequal resources, experiences of neglect or exploitation that undermine groups’ interest in engaging with the powerful. A transformation in orientation to community engagement is in order if we are to produce effective, locally-attuned collective action in the face of social shocks.

Introduction

Some voices are routinely left out of decision-making, and when they are invited to the table, participation can be at the lower rungs of Arnstein’s (1969) classic “ladder of participation”: tokenistic or manipulative (Cook et al. 2013). The rhetoric of ‘hard to reach’ is especially pervasive in governmental agency narratives about civil participation in risk management. This concept is problematic in several ways: it suggests that the shortcoming is the responsibility of the less-heard voices themselves; it also assumes that agencies are already reaching out and actively listening to their communities. There are many reasons why this may not be the case including institutional positioning (who is conceived as at the centre), limited understandings of socio-cultural community dynamics (i.e., using different languages and cultural references), and uncertainties about what constitutes meaningful participation. These sit alongside entrenched organisational worldviews and lack of resources. There can also be major misconceptions about who is vulnerable and who has capacity for resilience, meaning that valuable resources remain un-accessed and uncirculated in local resilience planning. This critical perspective asks us to focus less on how to “give voice” to the less heard, and more on how policymakers can be pressed to more effectively listen, and

respond, to the voices they have traditionally been less willing to hear (Campbell et al., 2010; Dhungana and Curato, 2021).

The roundtable was made up of an interdisciplinary and inter-professional group of delegates including representatives from local governments, the non-profit sector and academia - all of whom work on the topic of community resilience to weather and climate extremes (see Biographies). This roundtable paper synthesises some of the interdisciplinary and inter-professional discussions from a participatory one-day seminar within the CASCADE-NET series (London, Seminar 6 in June 2019¹) that focused on civil agency for extreme weather resilience and drew on UK and international case studies. It also casts its net wider to draw lessons from other risk contexts. Presenters from the seminar programme had a follow-on virtual discussion (June 2021) that was recorded and transcribed. This paper, framed as a roundtable, draws on observations and insights articulated during both events.

This paper begins by asking: who are the voices in society that are less involved in extreme weather adaptation and wider resilience building? and how do perceptions of accessibility and vulnerability interweave with reality? It then explores questions of how deeper engagement might be achieved against a backdrop of historic trust issues. Drawing on civil society experiences during the recent COVID-19 pandemic, the paper finally explores why the present moment is an opportune time to push forward the research needs and priorities – conceptual and methodological – that can foster transformation of policy and practice around engagement with “less-heard” voices.

1. Who are the less-involved voices in extreme weather adaptation and wider resilience building?

To start off the roundtable discussion, CASCADE-NET members discuss who might or might not be among the less-heard voices in extreme weather adaptation and resilience-building. Who is and who is not at the climate resilience table, and why? Ideas touched on include potential misconceptions about who is vulnerable. For example, could older or disabled people have unrecognised resilience in the form of social capital or experience with navigating difficult circumstances? Conversely, could wealthier people be more vulnerable because of over-reliance on wealth to reduce shocks and solve problems? Could “less-heard” include those relatively well-off people who do not participate because they do not think they need to? Is vulnerability different from being less heard?

Glyn: By 2033, in this country, the number of people over 85 is projected to more than double. Consequently, the number of people who are disabled - who may be more likely to need assistance - will increase (almost 80% of those over 85 are disabled). Government statistics show that the proportion of disabled people is increasing at present, and not because of people getting older. Numbers are increasing among schoolchildren, and those of working age, presumably, because of the increasingly mainstream acceptance that Neurodiversity can be a disabling condition.

My argument, however, is that disability is not inability. Vulnerable people, such as children, the elderly and the disabled, get put in a little passive box, then put away - “you’re vulnerable, you need help” - and forgotten. Disabled people can have resilience and expertise from embodied life experience with their impairment, to help other people. And

¹ Seminar 6: Less heard voices within Civil Society for resilience: engaging diverse groups in knowledge exchange and capacity building **CASCADE-NET 6: London – ESRC Seminar Series: CASCADE-NET**

they could be quite resilient, because they've gone through things - all sorts of things - and found ways to cope. So, we should look to disabled people as sources of information, sources of knowledge and sources of resilience.

This can understandably be difficult, as getting engagement from disabled people will involve them having the time, energy and resources to engage. However, a variety of fora do already exist for discussions around disability and resilience (the disability resilience network, community resilience funds, local disability equality fora, a host of impairment-specific organisations, etc.). It is for relevant authorities to seek such groups out and open up conversations, and the best way to do this, to my mind, would be to employ disabled people with lived experience. These individuals will find a more open door when approaching groups, and their embodied expertise will produce enhanced empathy and understanding, and more productive conversations.

Kristen: I know in our communities, around climate change adaptation, the term 'less heard' is used, but we often use "hard to reach" too and that puts the burden on the people who we think we're trying to reach.

Kevin: Kristen is right and - for me - a key question is, 'hard to reach' for who? This typically means 'hard to reach' for institutions and this overlooks the extent to which working sincerely with people from 'the community' can get around this. We did this in the Urban Heat project (Burchell et al, 2017) and it really helped. A message for institutions: if you think certain people are 'hard to reach', this simply means that you are not working in the right ways; please engage with and learn from people who know how communities work and who know the community you want to engage with.

Matt: 'Hard-to-reach', for me, frames people out there as the 'unfortunate others.' I think that local developers and politicians are the 'hard-to-reach'. Try getting hold of them. It is very easy to stigmatize and frame the community members as a deficit.

Justin: Perhaps 'hard-to-reach' is an assumption held by those who are in policy roles or scientific organisations. For example, if messaging about severe weather is only shared in one language in the United States for instance, this misses out the almost 42 million Americans that speak Spanish at home (US Census, 2019²). Someone, somewhere made a scientific or policy decision to only share messaging in one language, putting those who do not speak it at heightened risk. Other assumptions around public complacency to severe weather alerts (e.g., Wang and Kapucu, 2008) is still a deeply embedded concern held by weather safety professionals of the public (Trainor, 2015). This might lead to further assumptions that the public is hard-to-reach or hard to convince, with further top-down solutions such as education of the public deemed as a requirement to fill the knowledge gap. Both these assumptions ignore the root causes of vulnerability (Wisner et al., 2004) that are often ingrained in a lack of financial, social and political capital. Perhaps we under-estimated the latter of these, because they are not at the scientific or policy table to be able to share their voice, perspective and reasoning.

Kristen: The point that Glyn made really jumps out at me. We make assumptions about who is most vulnerable and these could be totally wrong. It just highlights the need to get out and talk with people and listen to them and check our assumptions at every stage.

Lindsey: This notion of being 'vulnerable but strong' is important in community resilience planning and what knowledges are drawn on in decision-making. It applies across groups

² <https://data.census.gov/table?q=Language+Spoken+at+Home&tid=ACST1Y2019.S1601>

(by gender, age, disability, socio-economic status etc.) and in the intersectionality of these characteristics (see Harrington et al., 2023, this issue). Engagement of children in local adaptive planning for extreme weather and climate resilience is a good example (e.g. McEwen et al., 2020).

Kevin: The community sector – the third sector - it seemed to me, during Covid, was incredibly nimble. There was a flexibility there and a speed of action. I live in a small town in South Devon, and I observed a lot of really nimble action in the third sector, but with difficulties, in terms of the relationships, with the Local Authority. There is lots of agency - so much agency. Central government, on the other hand, for a variety of reasons seems to be paralyzed, with not much agency, and paradoxically appears to be a site of great vulnerability. That is where the vulnerability is, in Whitehall and Downing Street.

Lindsey: If you think about the COVID-19 pandemic, about the climate crisis, then what we are going to see is more compound and cascading risks, or things that are overlaid or following on from each other, in varying combinations. And it is getting more complex both in terms of the risk, but also in the intersections of how different communities, with unequal resources, are affected by those different risks. And that means that the standard models where you see simple graphics of vulnerability and resilience get much, much more complicated because both sides are increasingly complex in their interactions.

Flora: Inequalities and dynamics of stigma and blame play a part in compounding these risks. Government communications about who is to blame for not protecting themselves in the pandemic, not getting vaccinated, actually make people more vulnerable and silence their voices. Racialised communities and frontline, often precarious workers with no employment protections, have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, and then blamed for it! And there is another nasty dynamic of centrally produced messages of stigma and blame that can end up causing divisions, conflicts and problems within communities as well (Ahearne & Freudenthal, 2021).

So critical issues are about who is placed at the centre of an engagement process and the nature of work cultures and language, and how these meet the cultures of more marginalised community groups. Resilience-related knowledge can sit in less obvious and accessible places, and attending to inclusive engagement processes involves on-going co-working with key trusted gatekeepers with the prior connections that can bring voices and knowledge to the table. Blame likely closes doors.

2. How can deeper engagement be achieved?

Having talked about the complexities around the term 'hard to reach', the CASCADE-NET team talk about how better, deeper, engagement might be achieved. The team discuss notions of trust that can affect climate change policy implementation, how a lack of listening can affect engagement with less-heard populations.

Ed: In that title ('Rebuffing the 'hard to reach' narrative: how to engage diverse groups in participation for resilience'), the word that jumps out is the "how" - how to engage diverse groups?

Kristen: Something that came from Robin (Leichenko) was the way that well-intentioned efforts, for example measures to improve natural flood resilience or shading or green space, are sometimes not welcomed by communities because they're seen as – or effectively are – gentrification.

Robin: Concerns about gentrification are pervasive in many of the communities that we work with (Foster et al., 2019). The biggest concern that we heard about – and this came out in our research in New York City – was that climate change adaptation and resilience action can contribute to gentrification that leads to displacement of local residents. It's a very real conversation for many communities because they feel like climate change adaptation can be a bit of a trojan horse. So, you introduce a large, green, flood resilient building right on the waterfront, which then also happens to have rents that are two or three times higher than what anyone who currently lives in the area has been paying. This can then contribute to displacement (see Nyugen and Leichenko, 2022, this issue).

Kevin: Trust hasn't come up yet in the conversation. We are being asked, so often, why certain groups aren't trustful of vaccination or aren't trustful of what they're being advised to do in general, and for me that's the wrong question – it is not why don't people trust, it's why do institutions behave in untrustworthy ways? Because people are basing their responses on their experience of untrustworthy behaviour on the part of Institutions. And well, of course the media give that a twist and a turn and social media does that twice over, but still the fact remains that, going back to our treatment of language and of rephrasing what the important questions are, I think we can add that to the list.

Justin: The point about trust that Kevin made is essential. Consequently, institutions including scientific ones working in specific areas of severe weather including National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Sea Grant, have found ways to work within communities, learning first hand what barriers exist, why they exist and working with those publics via knowledge and cultural brokers to build trusting relationships to understand how to reach the most vulnerable. This cannot work as a one-off intervention and so one project I lead has a minimal five-year timeline to improve severe weather outcomes for hard-to-reach groups, who are far more likely to be killed or severely injured when tornadoes occur across the southeastern United States. We take a Theory of Change (e.g., Anderson, 2005) approach that brings professional organisations and the public together to learn from each other and problem solve. We recently engaged an outreach and learning specialist through the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) system because representation and trust was seen to be initially lacking in our work.

Flora: I think it relates to what Kristen has been saying. It's also about people listening. After Grenfell, the community was not “hard-to-reach”, it was active, it was speaking out, but it was “less heard”. And that was because of a lack of willingness to listen. So, as Cathy Long presented at the workshop, graffiti and street art were there for all to see, there was evidence in front of your eyes, everywhere, about what people's concerns and issues, priorities and values were. They were being voiced in meetings, loud and clear, but there seemed to be an inability or unwillingness to listen, adapt, make changes and so on. And I think it relates to what Glyn was saying about so-called vulnerabilities, and what Matt was saying about agency. Disabled people have agency; they are creating and sharing knowledge, workarounds and solutions (Dokumaci, 2023). Residents have massive agency. They're doing loads of really important things (Cornish, 2021). They're not necessarily supported, listened to, engaged with and not being met. So often there is a lot of *voicing*, there's not a lot of listening. The shift required in the perspective of disaster responders is to start with the assumption that expertise exists, it is being expressed and enacted, and the challenge is to be open to engaging with that expertise wherever it is found, rather than asking for it to be expressed in the terms of government of policy, through the mechanisms of government and policy such as consultations or formal opportunities for engagement.

So deeper engagement is about building trust and relationships and active listening, and on that basis, committing to meaningful action. This involves listening to diverse community voices in understanding the impacts of government climate adaptations, when, for example, well-intended interventions impact very negatively on local communities. Deep engagement to support and empower community agency is key, recognising that trust is hard won, and easily lost. Trust can be won by decision-makers taking action, and taking risks to prioritise those less heard voices. A key question is whether and how locked-in inequalities might be reversed through 'better' engagement.

3. Why are the voices isolated?

The CASCADE-NET team discuss the isolated nature of Civil Society responses to the climate crisis. This is despite the urgency of the issue and – as the team debate - the reflexivity, flexibility and speed of response that exists within civil society groups. In the recent Covid pandemic, these groups were able to call upon their local knowledge and skills – their knowledge for resilience - to face up to another crisis. Yet these actions were largely unknown by and unconnected to the local authorities.

Matt: From a UK and London sense, there has been a lack of vision and planning for directing meaningful civil society action. In terms of infrastructure to support independent Civil Society groups, there are 32 London boroughs with an estimated 5,000 community groups in each, that are often working in complete isolation from mainstream charities or statutory partners. So people are meeting in mosques, churches, temples, people's front rooms, resident associations - all these groups are super-connected and providing incredible added value to service outcomes, but they're absolutely off the map when it comes to local authorities, silos and Service delivery. If there is a bit more care and attention to those relationships, then partnership working can be congruent and reciprocal rather than extractive. We have got this untapped reservoir of goodwill, but a complete lack of conceptual thinking of what that looks like. People are familiar with very large charities, but they haven't got a clue about what's below that, let alone how they get the relationships to really bring that to the fore.

During Covid, there was an obvious disconnect between central and local government. So, in the UK, we've got a very strong central state. So, I think, with that centralized instinct, what you get is, 'a civil contingency plan,' which is incredibly top-down. The Gold Command was the Army doing a military operation, saying "This is what we need to sort out" and there's a chain of command with volunteers waiting to be told what to do. Whereas actually goodwill happens spontaneously. People don't necessarily need to be told what to do. They will do a whip-round; they will provide that resource as well. I think there was a lot of PR around - not quite 'spirit of the blitz' - but wanting to hear good news stories about this human generosity. At the same time, there was a real lack of structural thinking about how you nurture and support Civil Society in the long term. There's a lot more that could be said about how we do this better in the future and get away from that kind of knee-jerk Command-and-Control. What you don't get is the intelligence upwards, in terms of what residents are experiencing and picking up. It's a real bottleneck.

Flora: Matt has really said it. In North Kensington, London, after the Grenfell Tower fire, some of the groups who emerged in response to the fire - but had previously existing community networks - then switched around and started supporting people through the pandemic. Latimer Community Art Therapy, for example, is a small organisation that emerged out of local art therapists and youth workers responding to the needs of children

and young people in the aftermath of the fire (Rudnik, 2022). When Covid lockdowns happened, they rapidly switched to working remotely, delivering art packs to doorsteps and supporting people with tutorial videos and online meetings. It was really incredible. But this flourishing is almost completely unsupported. They have their own networks, person-to-person, and group-to-group, via particular people, but there's no coordination or appreciation or recognition of what they've actually achieved and how valuable they are. And of course it is unsustainable to expect that spontaneous voluntary response to maintain its energy and creativity in response to the continuous cascading risks that communities face.

Robin: The same thing happened in New York with a number of the groups that mobilized after Hurricane Sandy. These same groups came together and focused on covid. So, that exact lesson was here too - this sort of rapid capacity and ability to come together reflects the fact that people had already mobilised during a prior event. (See Landau, 2022, this issue).

Lindsey: An eye-opener for me during Covid (while undertaking research on capturing children's experiences; see 'Voices in a Pandemic'; vip-clear.org.uk) was the role of schools in socially disadvantaged communities and how things that you thought might be there - social structures through social services and so on - just seemed to disappear. The schools took on a really active role in terms of care in the community, in terms of families and so on. So they weren't just looking after the educational welfare of the children in the school, they were looking after the parents and so on. They filled a huge void and had quite pivotal roles. The school head teachers were just a breed apart. Really, I haven't quite met people before in my research work that are quite so impressive in terms of the way that they are multi-tasking and dealing with these issues around social inequality and disadvantage, etcetera, because of the knowledge of families they have within their schools.

Kristen: We talk a lot about community resilience and this idea that we want to continue to improve community resilience and make people more self-sufficient, so they don't rely so much on agencies. But the government's been cutting funding to local authorities and other agencies, and so many communities and organisations have said that the agencies weren't reliable in the first place. Effectively they cut funding and then tell us to rely more on ourselves. And actually, it's the voluntary sector and communities that have stepped up.

Justin: When we talk about marginalised voices, we need to address why they're marginalised in the first place, including whether they feel marginalised and/or whether a society's marginalised them. I certainly think political decisions, both through austerity and through the casual xenophobia within the last administration in the United States, really added to that sense of fear. And then, you know, we ask questions such as, "why are people hard to reach in say, Latinx communities in Southern California?" without critically reflecting on why. If we did, we might realise that they might be a little bit mistrustful of the police knocking on their door, telling them to move down the mountain because there's a fire coming because what they're seeing and what they're afraid of are the uniforms and the authority and agencies that they represent (Sharpe, 2021). So, it's really important that we look at those things.

Lindsey: It is worth reflecting that community groups and networks being isolated or disconnected from government can be for varied reasons. This includes freedom to work in their preferred ways, and not to be subject to extractive practices that harvest their knowledge and expertise. Community groups also often have a natural lifecycle of emergence and decline. People's ability to contribute to such groups will often deplete over

time. However, groups can be reborn under new leadership and with a refreshed focus. This lack of continuity brings both challenges but also benefits.

So some communities may be perceived from outside as being isolated, but their social networks can be rapidly and nimbly put into action during crises. We can often see greater flexibility and responsiveness to changing circumstances and local need than with rigid government structures. Covid as an unforeseen social shock is a case in point.

4. Are we at a perfect moment in time to transform policy and practice?

Finally, on the back of COVID-19, the CASCADE-NET team discusses the heightened level of interest that policymakers currently display, and how this is an opportune moment to press the case for a more joined-up and inclusive civil society. Perhaps we could use the “pandemic as a portal” (Roy, 2020), harnessing the disruption and impetus created by the pandemic, to open up new possibilities for listening to the previously less heard, and to tackle the systems that create vulnerability – aiming to secure some form of “disaster justice” (Montano, 2021).

Kevin: One possibility, might be to think about this in terms of: How might we want somebody in the Cabinet Office to think about these things differently? How might we want somebody in the local authority to think about these things differently?

Flora: The idea of relational policy-making may be helpful here (Cornish and Cochrane, 2023). A civil society organisation called the Relationships Project (<https://relationshipsproject.org/>) asks us to consider what our policy and practice would look like if relationships were genuinely seen as central to all activities or change efforts - rather than as nice extras, or as resources to be instrumentally used to enact top-down policies. If we set aside our externally-imposed agendas, goals and targets, and genuinely started with relationships with affected communities, we would be listening and responding from the beginning.

Kevin: And I don't know where you're at with this in the US, Robin, but in the UK, we now have a very strong impact agenda³ in government-funded research, in which researchers are actively encouraged to seek societal impact, including in policy.

Kristen: I think Covid has made us think about how the interventions, the solutions that we're trying to come up with, can be more efficient in the sense that we are actually thinking more strategically about health, adaptation, social justice, and vulnerability in an integrated way. We've been really conscious, particularly in the adaptation space, about the potential overlaps between the vulnerabilities from Covid and the vulnerabilities from things like heat and the way that those are the social vulnerabilities that need addressing.

Robin: In the United States, Covid brought out the magnitude, seriousness and urgency of paying attention to marginalized groups. Covid showed how vulnerabilities intersect along lines of income, race, ethnicity, and immigration status. It was life or death and I think that awareness among policymakers, city officials, and the public at large was brought to a heightened level around these inequalities. To me this is a big change but also an opportunity.

³ For example, the UK Research Excellence Framework for grading and funding research in universities has increasing attention to impact.

Justin: For me, this 'post-Covid' moment should allow time for critical reflection and an opportunity for Transformative Learning (TL). For example the work of Jack Mezirow, in the mid 1990's and early 2000's (e.g., Mezirow, 1994, 2000) and also Patricia Cranton, (e.g., Cranton, 1996) suggest that TL can open scope for promoting self and collective efficacy within learning systems, including governance of policy but also organisations and wider society. However, perhaps the hardest-to-reach are politicians who influence policy but are often subject to automatic responses (e.g., Sharpe, 2016) that are framed by political survival rather than critical reflection that can lead to deeper learning and change.

Flora: Perhaps I could add another example from a collaboration involving the After Disasters network? When the Covid-19 crisis hit the Falkland Islands, my colleague Kate Cochrane was leading Emergency Planning there. She brought together a group of emergency management and healthcare practitioners, policy makers and researchers to design a series of community impact assessments, which made visible - for the first time to some parliamentarians - the vulnerability and hardships faced by some pensioners and racialised groups with the most precarious residency status. Politicians really listened to that report and it had an impact. In April 2021, the Chief Economist's report highlighted income inequality for the first time. The government established an Equalities working group and an initiative to enact a Race Relations Ordinance that had been mothballed. We very explicitly argued that there was no excuse for being fatalistic that some people are "hard to reach" – they were not "hard to reach" when we made the effort (Cochrane et al., 2023). So this was one example of using the momentum of the pandemic to listen to people made vulnerable and to start to address longer standing inequalities.

5. Conclusion

The roundtable suggested a major rethink about how we consider certain people to be vulnerable, hard-to-reach or less-heard. We have argued that it is often decision-makers and power-brokers in local and national government that are 'hard-to-reach', not the people made most vulnerable to crises. We have discussed how affected and vulnerable communities are often busy responding, expressing their voices, and sharing solutions, if policy-makers are willing to listen on the terms of those communities. Shifting the paradigm from disaster preparedness and response being led by top-down processes and plans, to putting relationships first, is one vision for transforming organisational culture to be better attuned to grassroots realities, building trust and strengthening communication. Taking a relational approach may protect against the instrumentalisation of vulnerable communities, that is, where they are seen as resources to help agencies deliver on their centralised plans and targets. We also discussed the importance of trust, recognising that trust is earned when we show that we do not only act in our own interests, but can take a risk, or do something differently, because we have committed to listening.

The roundtable offered many examples of the ways in which language constructs different realities with significant real-world impacts. Compound risks and embedded community inequalities have created incredible complexities in societies. The impacts of these compound risks are experienced and creatively mitigated by often 'quiet' or less-heard voices at community level. The recent COVID-19 pandemic, for example, laid bare the role that schools play, not just in terms of the educational, physical, and emotional welfare of children, but also the physical and mental health of the parents. During the pandemic, the community sector was found at times to be most flexible, agile, and ready to attend to cascading risks. However, this reservoir of goodwill in civil societies risks being severely

depleted in the absence of recognition, support, and constructive engagement on the part of policymakers.

One result of this situation is that civil society groups often exist in isolation, not joined-up with other services or as part of a comprehensive response. This is not necessarily a 'bad' thing. Isolation may allow groups to protect themselves from being exploited or derailed. Moreover, some overlap or redundancy is often beneficial for resilience. In our conversation, we emphasised the agency and voice of spontaneous community responders, volunteers, and small local groups. Celebrating such leadership, however, should not mean that we disregard that some individuals may remain isolated and not heard, even by local grassroots groups. This suggests a need for greater attention on the part of government institutions to ensuring that people who are made vulnerable by failures of public policies are seen and heard. The related lack of attention to community needs and a legacy of mistrust has also been an impediment to creating constructive links between civil society groups and policymakers. Government institutions need to prove their trustworthiness, through their actions and demonstration of political will and commitment.

Beyond shining a spotlight on existing civil society agency, the magnitude, seriousness, and urgency of the social shock of the pandemic also provides a critical moment in time - an opportunity - to communicate that vulnerabilities to health crises, climate change, and other large-scale societal stresses are often inter-linked. Addressing these intersecting crises requires new inclusive ways of engaging in multi-stakeholder dialogue involving community participation, along with significant changes to entrenched organisational cultures. Engagement processes need to privilege sustained inclusive engagements through multiple channels, and make space and time for slower processes of active listening to build meaningful relationships and mutual trust for collective action. Importantly, failing to listen to any societal groups can only weaken our collective knowledge and understanding as a critical evidence base for local resilience-building. It has never been so important to place 'hard to reach' groups at the centre of deep engagement processes.

Finally, having this type of open collective reflection more frequently, and with a wider range of actors, is essential. Through this conversation, we have emphasised that in order to engage diverse voices, it is power holders who need to change. We have suggested that they need to be genuinely open to listening to, and acting upon, the voices of less heard groups. The powerful also need to actively listen on the terms of groups who are voicing their experiences, rather than force them into pre-arranged consultation formats, at lower rungs of Arnstein's (1969) ladder. This engagement needs to occur early, widely and frequently to build trust. Indeed, trust is best built by demonstrating willingness to listen, through actions. There are embedded systemic issues that need tackling: historical mistrust, unequal resources, and experiences of neglect or exploitation that undermine groups' interests in engaging with the powerful. A transformation in orientation to community engagement is in order if we are to produce effective, locally-attuned collective action in the face of social shocks.

Acknowledgements:

CASCADE-NET was funded by the ESRC grant no: ES/N008944/1. Authors gratefully acknowledge the contribution of the presenters at the one-day CASCADE-NET seminar and Ed Barsley, Cathy Long and Anusha Shah in the follow up discussion.

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Biographies

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Professor Lindsey McEwen is Professor of Environmental Management at UWE Bristol and director of the Centre for Water Communities and Resilience. Her research interests include flood heritage, specialist/lay knowledge integration, water risk management and community learning for resilience. This work involves co-working with diverse groups in communities. She co-led the original CASCADE-NET seminar on which this roundtable paper is based.

Matt Scott is Director of the Thames Ward Community Project that aims to create sustainable, community-led change.

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