

Politicizing disaster governance: Can a board game stimulate discussions around disasters as matters of concern?

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Abstract:

The disaster risk reduction (DRR) community tends to treat disasters and risks in a managerial and technocratic way, thereby disregarding the highly political nature of DRR. An alternative epistemology of disasters, as “matters of concern”, is proposed and tested. Mobilizing concepts from Chantal Mouffe and Bruno Latour, this paper illustrates how DRR can be transformed into a public issue. It is argued that education and policymaking on DRR would benefit from a recognition of the hybrid nature of disasters. A serious game is used to investigate proposed epistemology. The board game simulates political decision-making on the reduction of risks due to floods and landslides in South-West Uganda. It is hypothesized that the game can generate an ideal speech scenario that fosters discussions among players and possibly even creates a space of political confrontation. Discussions during ten gameplays have been recorded, transcribed and analyzed (1) to understand how the dominant epistemology facilitates an apolitical approach to disasters and (2) to understand the process of politicization and de-politicization brought about when playing the board game in order to derive recommendations for future tools to facilitate a political appreciation of disasters. Our results indicate that participants effectively experience affects, power relations and confrontations during the game, but that a call for consensus and technical solutions is used by the players to close the discussions and move on with concrete solutions. Insights from this paper contribute to understanding why DRR is frequently treated as a technical issue in local and international disaster governance. Epistemology and approaches proposed in this paper are expected to stimulate innovative experiments towards a more political approach to DRR education and policy.

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