There are no blueprints for policy impact, but you can improve your chances by being flexible and iterative.

Bringing local, national and international knowledge on natural hazards and effective approaches to responses could hugely improve resilience in vulnerable areas. **John Young** *describes the general approach adopted by the Overseas Development Institute in their programme to improve disaster risk reduction strategies. He argues that one of the biggest contributions the approach has made is its emphasis on taking the time to understand the local context and build the relationships that enable true collaboration.*

Shaanxi province, China: In 1556 this region was victim of one of the most devastating earthquakes in human history, estimated to have killed around 830,000 people. It was not so much the force of the earthquake, but the type of housing and ill-preparedness of local populations that cost so many lives. More recently, in 2008, the Wenchuan earthquake in Sichuan killed 87,000 people and left nearly 5 million homeless. Incomplete knowledge of seismic hazard, long intervals between major earthquakes, and rapidly evolving societies makes improving resilience to earthquakes a particularly complex and challenging problem.

A village in Shaanxi, which I visited a few weeks ago, is a typical microcosm of these challenges: while a range of disaster risk reduction (DRR) procedures were in place, local workers were worried that what they were doing was not backed up by locally relevant and up to date knowledge on the best ways to prepare. They had developed DRR kits, but these didn't include space-blankets which have saved countless lives following many different types of natural disaster.

This knowledge deficit is a common problem in many countries facing these types of challenges, and not one that is restricted to local level access to international knowledge. Regional authorities frequently lack information about their own region, and national level authorities are unaware of practical approaches that have been developed locally. Bringing local, national and international knowledge on earthquakes and other natural hazards and effective approaches to preparedness and response could hugely improve resilience.
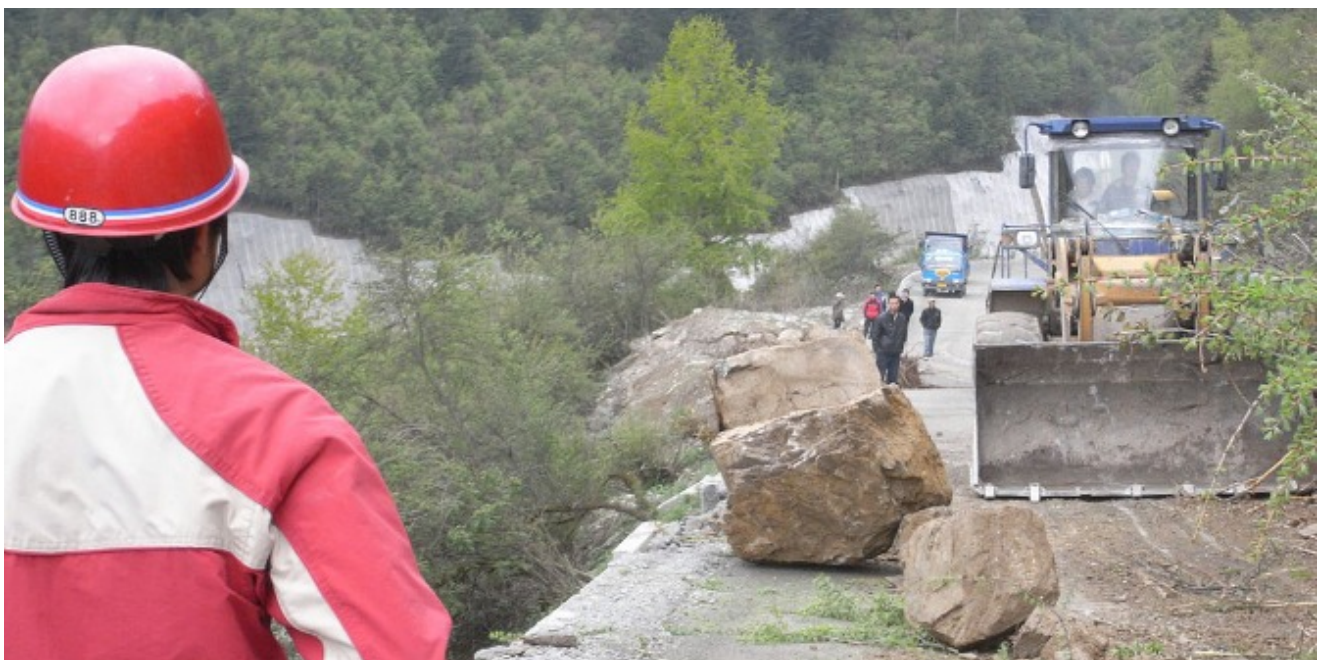
Image credit: 2008 Sichuan earthquake, Courtesy of Miniwiki.org (Wikimedia, Public Domain)

My team at ODI has spent the last 12 years helping researchers and policy-makers to make better use of knowledge and in particular, research-based evidence. We have always been wary of publishing an explicit "how to" guide, partly because there is no blueprint to achieve policy influence: each situation demands an approach closely tailored to the specific context. Nonetheless, we have recently published an online guide – the RAPID Outcome Mapping Approach (ROMA) – which draws on lessons and tools for planning from a range of contexts. The general approach is very simple, from diagnosing and defining the problem, identifying what new knowledge is needed and factors that could influence policy and practice, to developing a strategy and monitoring and evaluating learning systems.

We currently are applying this approach to a major NERC/ESRC funded project, Earthquakes without Frontiers, involving natural and social scientists from UK universities, and working with local scientists, policy-makers, practitioners, NGOs and communities on the ground in Nepal, China and Kazakhstan. Within five years, it aims to provide transformational increases in knowledge about earthquake hazards in the continental interiors; identify pathways to increased resilience; and to secure these gains over the long term by establishing a well-networked partnership. So it is not unambitious! Here's how we are applying the ROMA approach in practice:

Diagnosing the problem: The key focus of work during the first year was to bring together the international scientists and scientists from the China Earthquake Administration (CEA), Shaanxi Seismology Bureau (SSB), academics and agencies involved in DRR research and response nationally and locally, including the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA), and NGOs to work out what was needed to improve resilience through research and policy solutions. What rapidly emerged, was the huge amount of local knowledge which national-level stakeholders were unaware of, and the variety of plans being developed at national, provincial and local level, which do not yet join up effectively.

Developing a strategy: The first step towards developing a strategy was simply to find out more. So for much of the second year, the natural science team have been working closely with CEA and SSB counterparts to map the faults in more detail, and the social science team has been finding out more about national and local plans, and spending time with local NGOs to identify what additional knowledge they need. The next step will be a workshop in October, bringing together global experience, national and local policies and plans, and the on-the-ground local experience to both improve the awareness of all stakeholders, and to identify a range of practical approaches that can be tested locally.

Monitoring and learning: Until the pilot projects have been identified, and the engagement strategy has been developed, it is not possible to finalise the monitoring and evaluation system. But it will need to include mechanisms to track the progress of the pilot projects and the knowledge that emerges from them, whether that knowledge is being used in local and national plans and procedures, and most importantly, whether this approach to building a coalition of all the different stakeholders involved in earthquake resilience in China is facilitating knowledge generation and use, and ultimately better resilience to earthquakes.

Perhaps the biggest contribution the ROMA approach has made to this project in China so far is its emphasis, itself based on substantial research, on taking the time to really understand the local context and build the relationships that enable true collaboration. But this is our complex problem and how we're trying to tackle it – yours may be very different and that is why planning policy engagement needs to be flexible and iterative. While there isn't a blueprint, there is still much we can do to help knowledge improve policy – and save lives.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our Comments Policy if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the Author

John Young is head of the Research and Policy in Development programme at the Overseas Development Institute.

He leads work on monitoring and evaluating complex projects, particularly in the field of policy influence and advocacy, exploring transdisciplinary approaches to research and understanding and promoting evaluation use and research uptake.