INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE AND DISASTER: PERSPECTIVES FROM DISASTER STUDIES

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Good day everyone! I have been tasked to provide some reflections on our discussions from the perspective of disaster studies and disaster risk reduction.

First and foremost, it has been very useful and insightful for me to attend this meeting. I did not really know where I was going because I am beyond my comfort zone here. I have no background whatsoever in heritage nor folklore studies. I am a geographer with a background in disaster and development studies and have realized that our field has a lot to learn from living heritage, ICH and heritage studies at large. I think it is not so much about the contents, that are ICH and living heritage, because disaster studies and disaster risk reduction consider most of what we have been talking about over the past few days. Many things that are relevant to our discussions here have indeed been in the disaster literature since the 1950s.

I think it is more about the process and how you do things in your field, both in terms of research and policy/practice, that we may learn a lot from you. This was reflected in our discussions and seeing local researchers, local practitioners, talking about their own experiences, talking about their own localities, wherever it is in the world, was very refreshing because we seldom have that kind of setting in disaster studies and disaster risk reduction. Disaster studies and disaster risk reduction are the playground of Western researchers and Western ideas. Our field is skewed and biased by Western epistemologies. I am going to give you just a couple of figures to illustrate that.

Over the past 40 years, 93% of people who died in disasters were living in countries that are not members of the OECD. I am using the OECD as a proxy for the West. I know it does not really work for Japan, Chile and Mexico, but this is the closest I can think of. So, 93% of those who died in disasters over the past 40 years were living in non-OECD countries. At the same time, you look at the authorship of papers published in the leading journal in our field, which is titled *Disasters*, and you realize that 84% of the lead authors are affiliated with institutions located in OECD countries.

There is a huge discrepancy to the point that with some colleagues we have been talking about a 'gold rush' of researchers flocking to places affected by disasters in less wealthy countries, doing research there with so many biases and skewed assumptions about what is happening. This is problematic. I think seeing local researchers, local people, talking about their own experiences is something that has been very refreshing during this meeting, especially because we, in our field, claim to be radical. We claim to do things differently but we are not as radical as we claim we are. We

have changed for the better, I promise, over the past 40 years. We have moved from a hazard-focused and technological approach to an approach which is more people-focused, everyday life-focused. But we are still reproducing a neocolonial, or sort of orientalist approach to studying disasters and doing disaster risk reduction.

Just look at the concepts we use. The very concept of disaster is a very Western concept. It was challenged 40 years ago as something which is very hard to translate in most languages of the world. In the Philippines, for example, we do not have an exact translation in many local languages. The same is valid for vulnerability. Vulnerability was suggested 40 years ago, in the mid-1970s, as a prompt to change the way we look at disasters, to move from the hazard perspective to a more people-centered perspective. But in no way we were meant to roll out the concept elsewhere in the world because it does not work; it does not translate. But this is what we are still doing 40 years afterwards.

So, we claim to be radical – but we are not, especially in terms of the process, how we research and how we do disaster risk reduction. You are showing us the way, I think, in how you do things in your field of heritage studies. I think there are a lot of things to learn on our side.

I have been personally encouraging people in our field to engage in some sort of subaltern disaster studies. I am not sure if you are familiar with subaltern studies. It was suggested in the 1980s by a number of South Asian, mostly Indian, historians who wanted to study South Asian history away from colonial sources, colonial records, and away from colonial epistemologies. The likes of Guha and Spivak who conducted fantastic studies in the 1980s and 1990s. I think we should encourage people to do that in disaster studies. Local researchers, local practitioners, studying their own locations, their own disasters from their own perspectives and trying to design policies and practices from their own perspectives.

I think you are going in this direction by encouraging local researchers. This is something we have seen over the past three days and there have been many examples of this kind of approach. I am going to use Fadjar (Thufail)'s study of Merapi as a sort of highlight, because we have a lot of studies of Mt Merapi in disaster studies. Most of these studies have however been conducted by American, French, German, Belgian and British researchers while very few have been carried out by local Indonesian researchers. Fadjar's study was so refreshing, pitching the whole topic from a very different perspective, a very sophisticated theoretical approach. It shows that it is possible. I mean, our ideas in the West are not the only way. I include myself in those people who need to be challenged here because I have been using the concepts of vulnerability and disaster and I am a culprit as much as others. But it was so refreshing to see such a study of Mt Merapi. I think we should go in this direction and there is a lot to learn from you.

So, a lot of opportunities, but as well, I think, some challenges ahead if we want to bring our fields together. The challenges I see in terms of pulling things together or learning from you are actually challenges we are both facing at the moment in our

respective fields. I am just going to focus on three of these challenges. There could be more, but three will be enough for the little time I have.

The first one is the kind of imperative we feel to list or label things and people. You have your UNESCO lists. We have our lists of vulnerable people. Section V of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, for example, lists a number of people deemed vulnerable in disasters. People with disabilities, women, children, older people, migrants and indigenous people. Should we actually label these people as vulnerable? Should we actually list them? The upside is that is we steer attention, and obviously NGOs get traction. They can get funding because the governments need to report on what they have done to foster let's say women's participation in disaster risk reduction. But at the same time what about those who are left out? I work with prisoners at the moment. I also work with homeless people. They are not in any lists. There is therefore a threshold of attention. They get further marginalized.

At some point it is good to label people, to list things, and I guess it is the same for your heritage lists. However, what about the places, the practices, the cooking recipes and everything that is not on the list? Do they get noticed? Or do they get further marginalized because we think that we have captured everything? There is a real challenge here. So, we have to be careful if we think of importing your list of ICH and list of whatever into disaster risk reduction or into disaster risk assessment or post-disaster needs assessment. We have to be careful of being exhaustive. That leads me to my second challenge which is somehow related.

It is a tension that I have felt very strongly about as both an academic and a practitioner over the past three years. It is the tension between the moral imperative we feel to care for the most vulnerable but at the same time an obligation to respect local culture. My question to you is what if, by safeguarding ICH we, in the end, further marginalize and make some people more vulnerable than they already are?

I could use many examples of such dilemma. However, I am going to use just one from Australia. We are currently doing some work on a very remote island in the Northern Territory. It is an Aboriginal community located one hour and a half east of Darwin by plane. We are doing some participatory mapping, exactly what Abner (Lawangen) showed us on Friday, for water management. In that particular place, we need to work with the traditional owners of the land, the TOs, and it is a completely fair requirement to respect Aboriginal culture. I fully believe in this. But, by doing so, it means that we do not get any women's input on the map. If women in this particular place have to fly over the island, they have to cover their eyes because they are not entitled to look at some particular places that are sacred places. So, we respect local culture, we respect ICH, we maximize ICH by building on the TOs knowledge of the land but we further marginalize women. How do we deal with such a situation?

It is a classic humanitarian dilemma. Think of people working in a famine-type setting, in a patriarchal society, for example, where you have a very strong leadership of the elders, male elders. If you want to respect local culture and ICH then you have to go

through the male elders but in the end you may starve those who are most in need and who are possibly the women and the kids. If you want to feed the most in need then you have to bypass local culture. This is a challenge in terms of ICH. If we want to emphasize ICH, we may further marginalize some people. I do not have any definite solution but we need to think about such dilemma across our fields.

The third challenge is the balance we need to strike between what we talked about on Friday, which was safeguarding ICH (which is definitely very important) and what we talked about this morning, which is more about fostering ICH, or building on ICH, to actually foster disaster risk reduction or foster recovery. ICH, I would say, is part of what we call people's capacities. I have not heard the word capacities during this meeting. It is a Western concept again; biased, skewed. But we use this concept to capture the skills, knowledge, resources that people use to deal with hazards and to overcome disasters. This concept is important because capacities are endogenous (not indigenous). You are made vulnerable by how power and resources are shared within society but you hold your own capacities. So, it is much easier, from a practitioner's perspective, to enhance capacities than to reduce vulnerability.

These capacities are the extension of people's everyday life. Every one of you this morning referred to the concept of, or the idea of everyday life, especially Ryusuke (Kodani). You emphasized the importance of everyday life and how we should ground people's experience in everyday life. This is what capacities are about. It is the extension of people's everyday life.

We know that disasters are the extension of everyday life too. Disasters are in no way extreme and rare events dissociated from the regular social fabric. They are just the extension of this social fabric. That is why all these festivals, rituals, we heard about this morning are so important in terms of getting ICH into disaster risk reduction. Not as one more vulnerable thing to consider because if we go down that road of safeguarding only ICH, then it is going to be one more box to tick in our proposals and reports. A few years ago, we had gender. Gender, ticked. Then now we have ICH. ICH, ticked. We have to go beyond that. We have to look at ICH as a form of capacities and ground this in everyday life, ground this in the regular social fabric and build towards strengthening people's livelihoods and lives on an everyday basis. I think this is something that you have shown very strongly over the past few days.

In conclusion, I think that it has been a very useful experience for me to attend this meeting. I did not really know, as I said, where I was going. But it has been very useful. So, thank you very much.