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MIPP COVID-19 RESEARCH BRIEFING

BRIEFING NOTE: CLIMATE RISK GOVERNANCE IN LIGHT OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Purpose of the Note
On October 20 and 21, 2020, the MacEachen Institute, in partnership with the Marine Environmental Observation Prediction and Response Network (MEOPAR), hosted a public panel and roundtable to discuss how events like COVID-19 can help us to examine the climate crisis in a new light.

Panelists include Nancy Anningson (Ecology Action Centre), Jason Thistlewaite (Waterloo), Melina Kourantidou (Dalhousie) and Paul Foley (Memorial). This briefing note summarizes panelists' perspectives on land-use planning and risk governance in light of the COVID-19 crisis.

About the MacEachen Institute
The MacEachen Institute for Public Policy and Governance at Dalhousie University is a nationally focused, non-partisan, interdisciplinary institute designed to support the development of progressive public policy and to encourage greater citizen engagement.

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Speakers' Key Observations

- Perceiving risk as an individual responsibility absolves governments of their responsibility for the problem. Risk should be seen as a collective burden, where government takes on the majority of responsibility for managing a risk. By sharing responsibility for risk governance, more desirable outcomes are achieved.

- Risk policy should be developed through a lens of social and economic vulnerability.

- In order to achieve more desirable outcomes, stronger coordination between different orders of government is needed. Currently, misaligned policies, fragmented roles and responsibilities, and lack of proactive action stand in the way of effective risk governance.

Recommendations

- Federal and provincial governments have the most capacity to manage risk. Therefore, they should carry the burden of responsibility for risk management.

- Land-use planning is an effective strategy for mitigating risk. Moreover, citizens are not responsible for policing land-use infractions. Instead, systems should be put in place to ensure land-use policy is adhered to, particularly in areas exposed to hazards.

- Social and economic vulnerability should be reflected in risk assessment.

Introduction

Disasters are receiving more attention in Canada and around the world. In Canada, risk is governed by the *Emergency Management Strategy for Canada,* a document that guides federal, provincial and territorial (FPT) roles and responsibilities in disasters. Risk management is a responsibility shared among federal, provincial/territorial and municipal governments. Research on how risk is managed in Canada, however, suggests that individuals often carry the burden of responsibility when it comes to managing risk, despite having fewer resources than public agencies. There is an opportunity for all three orders of government to take a more proactive role in managing risk, particularly when it comes to protecting people who are already socially and economically vulnerable.

Land-Use Planning and Risk Management

In Canada, there are several apparatuses in place to protect people from risk. For instance, governments rely on land-use planning, risk assessment, risk communication tools and property-level protection to safeguard the public from risks. When these tactics fail, insurance and disaster assistance provide an additional layer of security.

Land-use planning is critical for effective risk management. By taking a proactive role in deciding where, how and what type of development can occur, land-use planning allows governments to manage individual and community exposure to risk. In many cases, however, there is a disconnect between hazard and risk-based assessments and contemporary land-use planning policy. As a result, development is often permitted in areas such as along the coastline that are known to be risk prone. Consequently, the onus of responsibility to deal with the consequences of exposure falls to the individual.

Another issue with contemporary land-use policy is the lack of consistency and coordination between jurisdictions. While risk is a shared responsibility, many communities living in geographic proximity are subject to different land policies. For example, in Nova Scotia there is currently no provincially regulated minimum setback or minimum vertical allowance along the coastline. This means that every municipality in Nova Scotia faced with similar risks has a different minimum setback and vertical allowance requirement for development along the coastline. Consequently, homeowners are often left to contend with hazards such as flooding and sea-level rise on their own. This is particularly problematic because individual homeowners are often not equipped with the skillset, economic resources or knowledge needed to make informed decisions about how best to manage risk.

If a disaster occurs, home insurance and disaster assistance provide a layer of protection to those affected. However, in most cases, governments already have all the necessary tools to proactively protect people from hazards such as flooding, sea-level rise and fire. Options such as buy-out programs and investment in climate resilient infrastructure are additional layers of redundancy available to governments to protect people from risk.

Ongoing Challenges to Managing Climate Risk through Land-Use Planning

Despite the wide range of tools available to government, particularly federal and provincial governments, many challenges exist to effective risk governance including:

- Intergovernmental coordination – Currently, policies adopted by some orders of government contradict those adopted by other orders of government. For instance, municipalities have an economic incentive to approve development in a high-risk area, despite provincial governments carrying the burden of responsibility for disaster assistance.

- Ambiguous and fragmented roles and responsibilities – Both the federal government and the insurance industry are currently conducting flood-risk mapping in Canada. Each has different methods and objectives.

- Insufficient investment in risk mitigation – Federal and provincial governments must proactively invest in risk-prevention infrastructure, such as coastal restoration projects.

Public Panel: Coastal Risk Governance: Lessons from COVID-19

On October 20, 2020, the MacEachen Institute, in partnership with the Marine Environmental Observation, Prediction and Response Network (MEOPAR), hosted a panel discussion of policy options for addressing the climate emergency in light of the COVID-19 crisis.

Below are highlights from the panel event, recommendations and summaries of key observations from each speaker's presentation and the subsequent discussion period.

Event Abstract

If both COVID-19 and climate change are to be treated as emergencies, the response by our leadership should have many of the same characteristics, including a clear, adaptable and coordinated approach.

The speakers have expertise in flood risk governance, coastal adaptation, community mobilization, political economy and natural resource management. Participants shared their perspectives in short presentations before engaging in a question and answer period.

Highlights

- Both COVID-19 and the climate crisis exacerbate existing socio-economic inequalities. Policy responses aimed at addressing these issues must account for socio-economic vulnerabilities.

- Proactively investing in risk reduction is a good investment. Risk reduction strategies such as strong land-use legislation, climate-resilient infrastructure and capacity-building at the community level prevent disasters from occurring in the first place.
- All orders of government must coordinate to reduce risk. Upper tiers of government, however, should take on the burden of responsibility because they have the most resources.

Recommendations

Looking forward, a clear, coordinated and adaptable approach is needed to address both COVID-19 and the climate emergency. All four presenters highlighted the need to take proactive action to prevent, mitigate and prepare for disasters. This approach includes early hazard identification and accessible knowledge dissemination, support for people who already experience social and economic vulnerability, and collaboration between stakeholders at all orders of government.

Panelists

Nancy Anningson
Coastal Adaptation Senior Coordinator, Ecology Action Centre

The COVID-19 crisis highlights the need to prepare for disasters in advance. By taking proactive steps to mitigate and prepare for disasters before they occur, individuals and communities are better equipped to respond to the adverse effects of disaster. COVID-19 has highlighted that responding to a disaster while it is occurring is not an effective approach. This lesson provides an important perspective for how coastal communities address climate change in Nova Scotia. By proactively investing in adaptation and mitigation strategies along the coastline, Nova Scotia's coastal communities will be better equipped to deal with adverse events such as coastal flooding, storm surge, inundation and saltwater intrusion. COVID-19 has also highlighted the need for intergovernmental collaboration, particularly when communities face similar problems. By sharing resources, communities can strengthen their capacity to respond to hazards. Provincial and federal leadership and a coordinated response between municipalities is critical for addressing both the COVID-19 crisis and the climate emergency.

Jason Thistlethwaite
Associate Professor in the School of Environment, Enterprise and Development (SEED), University of Waterloo

COVID-19 has exposed many gaps in how risk is governed in Canada. For instance, it has exposed Canada's failure to invest and proactively respond to risk before it materializes. More specifically, lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), failure to close the borders when COVID-19 first emerged, and insufficient testing capacity are gaps in Canada's pandemic response plan. Moreover, the COVID-19 crisis showcases how disasters, including climate change, disproportionally impact people who are socially and economically vulnerable and therefore have the least capacity to respond. Moving forward, particularly in light of the climate emergency, Canada should approach risk through the lens of anticipatory risk management, of which one core principle is to be precautionary. This means taking action early to address a risk,

despite some degree of uncertainty. Because upper-tier governments have the most resources to deal with risk, governments, not individuals, should bear the burden of responsibility for preventing disasters from occurring.

Melina Kourantidou
2019–2020 Junior Fellow of the MacEachen Institute for Public Policy and Governance

Disasters such as coastal flooding and the COVID-19 crisis highlight historic risk-governance failures. Specifically, pre-existing gaps in governance systems determine the scale and severity of a disaster. When a disaster does occur, responding to the consequence of the event does not necessarily address its root cause. Instead of reacting to disasters, governments must adopt plans and policies that proactively address the underlying issues that drive risk and vulnerability. This is particularly important because disasters, including both COVID-19 and the climate emergency, widen pre-existing socio-economic gaps. Therefore, policies must be developed based on an understanding of social and economic vulnerability. Ultimately, investment in both social infrastructure and physical infrastructure supports social-ecological resilience, thereby building the capacity of individuals and communities to respond to disaster.

Paul Foley
Associate Professor in the Environmental Policy Institute at Memorial University

The way the COVID-19 crisis has been managed in Canada highlights several policy opportunities for governments to approach the climate emergency. First, the crisis demonstrates how quickly governmental norms, institutions and priorities can change. For example, massive public investment by government, as well as widescale adoption of government policies such as quarantine orders and masks, highlights the potential for governments to make rapid societal-level change. Secondly, the pandemic highlighted the importance of creating policies using the lens of socio-economic vulnerability. Just like climate change, the effects of the pandemic are felt unevenly. When addressing the climate crisis, socio-economic vulnerabilities must simultaneously be addressed. Finally, governments have proven they have the capacity to provide a coordinated response to the pandemic; a similar level of coordination is required to address the climate emergency. Policy frameworks such as the "Blue New Deal" integrate some of these lessons and offer an innovative path that addresses social and ecological vulnerability.

Discussion Summary

The post-presentation discussion focused on some of the major governance barriers to addressing the climate crisis. Some of the major takeaways include:

- Liability and risk governance: It is rare that municipal and provincial governments are held liable for disaster because both tiers of government have processes, such as hazard maps and sign-off procedures, that demonstrate how they account for risk. The government often fails, however, to communicate risk accurately to the public, resulting in poor land-use decisions such as development in flood plains.
- Barriers to a "Blue New Deal": While a Blue New Deal presents significant opportunity for economic growth, several industries, including oil and gas, stand to lose

economically. Other structural impediments, such as barriers to taking on debt and lack of political and fiscal incentive for government, also present a challenge.

- Current state of affairs and the future approach: It is paramount that plans and policies do not just react to the crisis of the day. Rather, they must take into account both current and future generations as well as social and economic vulnerabilities.
- Innovation and the precautionary approach: Due to the necessity of guidelines and regulations, a precautionary approach to risk governance may slow government action in the short term. The COVID-19 crisis, however, demonstrates that the government has the ability to act quickly, while still acting with caution. Acting fast in response to a hazard, trying out a variety of approaches and creating system redundancies are critical components of precautionary risk governance.
- Community values and risk governance: When making decisions about risk, it is crucial to gain community buy-in. This is done by understanding community values and perceptions. While communities may be hesitant to acknowledge the risks they face, there is a cost to inaction. It is therefore crucial to build capacity from the ground up so that communities have the necessary knowledge, skillsets and resources to address issues they face.
- Social inequities: In Western countries, costal risks affect the well-off and less well-off unevenly. Wealthy individuals have the greatest capacity to protect themselves from and adapt to risk. Governments should therefore focus interventions on people who have the fewest resources to protect themselves from hazards. This is why a lens of socio-economic vulnerability is paramount to risk reduction.

More from the MacEachen Institute

The Institute is working to create resources and policy discussions focussed on the COVID-19 crisis. These include briefing notes like this one as well as panel discussions, videos and media commentary. You can find all resources related to COVID-19 on our website.

Other briefing notes in this series

- Observations from Toronto's Tourism Recovery Post-SARS in 2003
- Foot and Mouth Disease in the U.K. in 2001: Observations for Policy-Makers and the Rural Tourism Sector in the age of COVID-19
- Labour Issues and COVID-19
- Quarantine and COVID-19
- People with Disabilities and COVID-19
- Nova Scotia Power and COVID-19
- Health Care Issues and Media Coverage Before and During the Pandemic
- The Economy and Media Coverage Before and During the Pandemic
- Social Justice Issues and Media Coverage Before and During the Pandemic
- Environmental Issues and Media Coverage Before and During the Pandemic
- COVID-19: Leaders from the Health Community Identify Lessons from the First Wave and Concerns for the Second