SUMERNET "RESEARCH 4 ALL" PODCAST SERIES

EPISODE 8 – Epistemic injustice in water governance with Karen Delfau

Full transcript

[00:25-00:53]
Rajesh: Welcome Karen to this episode of "Research for all" of our SUMERNET podcast series. We are very happy to welcome you to this episode.

Karen is a lecturer, researcher and consultant exploring water governance and the inclusion of different ways of knowing and understanding water and rivers. She has been working with SUMERNET, looking at how co-creation and co-production of knowledge operate within water governance processes in the Mekong, focusing on women's knowledge.

[00:54-01:13]
Rajesh: So, Karen, we have been, of course, following your project on knowledge co-production in co-creation. Could you explain maybe starting with these two terms knowledge co-production and co-creation what do they mean? And especially feel free to use any examples from your work in the Mekong region.

[01:15-02:24]
Karen: So, I think what's a really good starting point is to understand the difference between knowledge co-production and co-creation. And it's interesting because as I emerged with this research, and I worked more to understand these terms, I feel that co-creation captures a lot more what we're trying to do. The co-production of knowledge is a kind of another element that's taking place. Let me explain.

When we talk about knowledge co-production, we're talking about trying to solve a problem or come to a solution or answer a research question by bringing together different methods or practices or knowledges, and just kind of combining those kinds of knowledges to figure out what's really going on, and how to move forward. So, it's a lot of times tied to a project or tied to a different objective.

Co-creation for me is much more about bringing together different ways of knowing, different worldviews, and trying to figure out what's really happening. How do we learn from each other? How do we understand where we're all coming from so that we can figure out how to work together to solve the challenges that were facing?

[02:25-03:08]
Karen: And in particular, we did a project that was both in Thailand and also in Myanmar. And the Myanmar component really did emerge as a pretty interesting co-creation process. We learned a lot from the process. We're bringing women together from across the region to understand, you know, what are the issues that women are facing in terms of water governance? And, how do they want to address them, and what knowledge do they have to share in this process? But it was really interesting because we realized that there are certain conditions for knowledge, co-creation as well as co-production such as political stability and having the right facilitator to be a part of this process, whether they are accompanying or directing or guiding that process.

[03:09-04:13]

Karen: One of the other questions around co-creation is: do we need to have a sort of physical context in order for women and other people to come together and actually co-create? Or, can we can we do this in a digital context? Can we do this online? And right now, I'm working on a project that's looking at developing a woman in water governance platform for women leaders, to be able to share across the Mekong Region, and eventually globally to share their knowledge, their experiences, and their stories and to be able to come together to connect and also to influence policy.

So, for me, the question that's really exciting is it's just needed to be tied to a physical, geographical location. Or can we bring this into the cloud? And can we bring this into the global network and influence and connect? And do all these things we've been talking about in co-create, in order to make change. How do women in particular bring their voices together? And it's going to be very exciting to see how this moves forward.

[04:14-04:41]

Rajesh: Excellent, Karen. This actually leads to the thing that we really want to explore in this podcast, the kinds of knowledge. But also how some types of knowledge seem to be more valued than others because there is a mainstream discourse in the Mekong Region especially on water governance. And there are other kinds of knowledges that marginalized. What is your approach in these situations when working with local knowledge co-creation, or in the context of marginalized knowledge?

[04:42-05:15]

Karen: We have so much at the international level around the inclusion of knowledge and the inclusion in principle and in practice. So, for me it's about knowledges inclusion. And if you want to look at it in terms of principle, we have these definitions and approaches and guidelines and frameworks that are shared with us from regional bodies and international partners. Even principles of integrated water management; they all legitimized inclusion and participatory approaches to water governance. And this is coming from these sorts of expert systems that exist.

[05:16-05:57]

Karen: But we're not seeing knowledge inclusion, or other social inclusion fully realized. And the question I've been thinking about for the past five years or my whole career really is what's going on and why not?

We can see that the issues of co-production and co-creation go completely sideways when the conditions aren't right. For example, [when] there's not a politically stable [situation], or we're not able to make the space to include the voices that we want to have included in that process. And whether it's contextual or interpersonal, what's happening? And I think there's a lot to be said about where the facilitator or the process doesn't consider epistemic justice considerations.

[05:58-06:32]

Karen: When the conditions are good, then we all follow these processes. And we all have the right people on the job, and the best guides and frameworks to show us how to do this. We're still not achieving justice or inclusion, and we see winners and there's trade-offs.

And there's lots of issues that emerge with trust and power and it's difficult to measure and monitor and make sense of what's happening. And my research has been to explore what needs to happen, particularly with water and rivers. Because I think water and rivers act as the first warning signal for other global systems, both human and more than human.

[06:33-06:45]
Rajesh: It's very interesting that you use this term "epistemic injustice". Could you help describe this a bit more, especially if you can provide some examples of this from your work in the Mekong region?

[06:46-07:27]
Karen: Let's look at these two words, right, Epistemic and Injustice. So first of all, what's epistemic? I guess the definition, if you look up is its relating to knowledge or the study of knowledge. Of course, there's also a legal definition, but it really is about relating to knowledge. And it was interesting because I thought about it and I was like what are they really talking about here. And I looked at the root of the word that the etymology of it and it's about the theory of knowledge and it goes back to Greek where it's talking about knowledge. The acquaintance was something skills and experience, so it's not just knowledge in your head but it's how you know, really how you know, in an embodied sense. And how do you know in terms of your emotional state as well? So it's like a deep sense of knowledge.

[07:27-08:28]
Karen: The word epistemology also relates to the justification of knowledge as well as the knowledge itself. And that's the logic or the thinking, or the understanding, and the connections that have created this whole system of knowledge.

So, epidemiology has to go with the mind's relation to reality. And those are different depending on who were talking to, whether it's me as a researcher or somebody who is maybe a rice farmer. We have totally different relationships with our environment and with water. In particular epidemiology comes from a different perspective. So, what are we talking about when we're talking about knowledge. Really briefly, we have explicit implicit and tacit knowledge.

We have explicit knowledge where knowledge is documented and shared. And then we have implicit knowledge which is when we apply that knowledge. And then we have tacit knowledge which is something that's really intangible and happening inside of our minds. And it's difficult to articulate. And so much of our knowledge is tacit and linked with accumulation of experiences. Okay, so that's epistemic, and that's the knowledge side.

[08:29-10:00]
Karen: But then what is justice? Injustice is really interesting because it's starting to emerge quite a bit in discourses. We're hearing a lot now about just energy transition, and just energy systems as a process to climate friendly energy systems. And justice is really the behavior or treatment that is fair and morally correct. We're treating knowledge, that's epistemic justice. Really, how are we treating knowledge and affair in a morally correct way? There are different types of epistemic justice that we should consider and they operate both on a micro level in between individuals and a macro level across society.

The most obvious one is testimonial injustice, and we have that when somebody on the receiving end of knowledge doesn't really give credibility to somebody who is sharing that knowledge with somebody who's saying because they have some kind of prejudice whether it's implicit in inside of them or whether it's

explicit against the speaker. So, somebody says something to us, and you know we have this a lot. If we don't speak multiple languages, you say well somebody's trying to tell me something but they don't speak English. They don't know what they're talking about, you know. Or I'm not going to believe this person because they don't have an education, they don't have a PhD. So, what are they talking about? That's very typical in terms of testimonial injustice. We have a bias or a sort of prejudice against who's sharing their knowledge.

[10:00-10:55]
Karen: But we also have hermeneutical injustice. And this is more about our social experiences. With hermeneutical injustice, we don't understand somebody because we can't really see where they're coming from, and we don't understand how they perceive the world, or what their reality is. And because of that, they just don't seem legible to us, and it doesn't make any sense. And we're not willing to sit down and really listen and try and figure out what's going on. This is something that you have at a micro level in between individuals but you can also have it at a macro level. You see this where there's a hierarchy of knowledge has or there's the dominant scientific system saying that's not a legitimate credible source of knowledge. We can't take this seriously. It's ethno-science, or superstition, or non-knowledge. And it's not acknowledging different worldviews and knowledge systems.

[10:56-12:11]
Karen: In step with this hermeneutical injustice, there's also this concept of epistemic resources which is the resources that you have to have in order to really articulate your experience, and to be able to share your knowledge. Sometimes it's really difficult, and sometimes you feel like this person in front of me is just completely looking at me with a blink because I'm not able to really articulate my priority, or where I'm coming from, or what I'm trying to achieve. And there's also the sense of us trying the hardest to understand those things. It serves us to understand, and when we work with communities in the region or other researchers in the region, we really need to understand that, a lot of times. We have to try hard to really understand what's going on. And there is a lot happening, and there are no simple solutions. And for me, I think it's really important to work closely with local researchers to do that. I'm originally from California. What am I doing in the Mekong, right? This is not my culture. I mean, I love it but it's not, it's not where I'm coming from. So, forming strong relationships with local researchers. I think it's really the best way to overcome these sorts of epistemic injustice.

[12:12-14:10]
Karen: It was so interesting what happens in the research in Myanmar because Shining [the local coordinator] brought together a number of the women from the community. Some community leaders start to figure out, okay, how we are going to bring about co-creation across this region this area and what are the main issues you're facing and what kind of emerged was look. We're having some real challenges around microfinance and what else they were having. Some, also some challenges around dealing with Covid and the stress and the tension of Covid as it was emerging. And we're like, wait a minute, this isn't water governance. This is [not] our agenda, right? Because we have a project, and we have a timeline, and we have a budget, and we want to make sure that we're kind of sticking with what we said we were going to do. But Shining was amazing. She said, look if that's what we need to talk about, that's what we're going to talk about. We're going to kind of explore these issues and find ways to share. And she was able to create the space with the women.

It was about connecting, not just on water governance, which we eventually got to, but also these other issues that were emerging. So co-creation says, look, we're going to convene a space. Maybe, we have a bit

of an agenda, but it's also your agenda. So, let's hear from you too, and let's work. Work that into the broader picture. So, they were able to have these conversations in parallel with some of the water governance and water access issues that had emerged, and that was really the focus of our research. But the co-creation approach really was like taking a step back, and thinking about how she was a facilitator and accompany these leaders coming together and creating the space and building this trust and generating a space for dialogue. So as I stated before, I think water is this sort of the first thing that we see being affected and impacted tied to so many other issues that were facing in the region.

[14:13-15:26]
Karen: Really quickly, I want to talk about epistemic exploitation, because I think that's something else that we see quite a bit, sometimes in research, and sometimes, just in our interactions interpersonally. And epistemic exploitation is this kind of practice of somebody who's privileged in terms of this knowledge hierarchy, for example, impelling somebody who's quite marginalized to produce some kind of knowledge or explanation about the oppression that they face.

And this is something I think we as researchers really can benefit from reflecting about. When we walk into a place, and then to question people about their oppression, or the challenges that they face in their livelihood, what's going on there? And how would I feel if somebody would come into my community and treat me that way? So, situating ourselves within the context and really reflecting on what we're trying to achieve, and how we go about doing that, and how not to bring about that sort of epistemic exploitation. And particularly, when somebody does open up and share.

And a lot of times the terminology that we use which is not an opening and sharing terminology, it's creating some tension in between people who are sharing knowledge. And we have to be really aware of the language that we use.

[15:28-16:08]
Rajesh: Thank you Karen. That was extremely well elaborated because this is a complex concept. So, just to recap for our listeners, Karen has been talking of three types of epistemic justice: testimonial, hermeneutical, and the epistemic exploitation. If I may, Karen, to explore the last two, for example, because hermeneutical, you said that also sometimes a gap in the collective understanding of the powerlessness of the group. I assume one could say maybe migrant communities, maybe a group of people that have been displaced by them, would that be kind of a group that is considered powerless in your view?

[16:09-16:48]
Karen: I think a good example of that is, you know, we have a regional body or we have maybe some sort of investment project that's coming in and building hydropower somewhere. They're required to do an EIA, SIA and environmental impact assessment, social impact assessment. And they have their protocols and they have their guidance and they have the consultants and they come in. It's a very extractive process where they're trying to figure out, okay, what data we need to complete this process. As opposed to, you know, what's really happening? What is this social mapping that's happening at the community level? What are the relationships? How is this linked to identity?

[16:49-17:38]
Karen: The deeper questions behind the relationships in the world and use of the people there. So, you see this little bit of a clash, and you can see this playing out in this process, not always, but it could happen. We can say it like that where my extractive process of trying to complete my analysis doesn't entirely fit the

lived experiences of the people that I'm engaging with. So, there's that kind of clash and that would be an example or could be an example of hermeneutical injustice. And also some extractive process, some sort of epistemic exploitation in a sense. I think also in research, we have to be really careful about how we engage with the community and how we enter into the community. And how do we work within the dynamics? Where do we situate ourselves?

[17:39-17:52]
Rajesh: Could you advise to researchers how you can do this in terms of the power dynamics at play? But also in context, about your earlier saying about knowledge co-creation, how does that help?

[17:53-18:29]
Karen: We have to go through the reflective process every time. We do anything really as much as we can as much as we can have space on our heads to do that. But also we have the realized that we are working across languages. We're working with translators and sometimes we're working with gatekeepers of communities of knowledge. And it's not easy. So, things can be lost in translation literally. We have involved in that process and how we engage with them; I think it's a really critical. So, recognizing that and working with that instead of working against it, knowing our place in that.

[18:29-19:36]
Karen: In terms of reflexivity, I think listening and learning is critical. What can I learn from this? What's really happening outside? There's a lot to learn from free prior and informed consent processes that exist as well as international approaches to working with divergent knowledge systems where I think we can sensitize ourselves with some pretty amazing global tools.

But overall, we need to have openness to other worldviews and solutions that don't always fit within whether it's our kind of expert paradigm or our capitalist systems. What are the different agendas and perspectives that are coming in, and how are they interacting with each other? And how do we start to understand each other and the dynamics of our interactions a little bit more? And that's a life study. If we can find places in our current sphere, where we can tap into this kind of learning, I think that as practitioners and researchers, we can really start to unpack and understand and move forward with solutions in a different way. [It's] not always easy, but it is definitely interesting.

[19:36-20:42]
Karen: And in terms of co-creation, I think co-creation is tied up in all of this whole creation. It isn't something that you can fit within a project framework. That's what I'm learning more and more. Co-creation is something that has to emerge from the development of collaboration at a long-term and ongoing scale of dedicated individuals who are saying: look, we're going to open up some space to start, to understand each other and work together, and rethink everything really. But that's not something that fits into a simple framework or a project timeline in a lot of cases. And I think that's really the challenge for co-creation. How do we create spaces for that deeper learning and that opportunity to tap into ways of knowing and learning about what we don't know we don't know, and to be able to share our perspectives and start to build something that helps us move towards some sort of goal that we're creating together.

[20:44-21:04]
Rajesh: Can we ask you to elaborate little bit further to the larger question of beyond our own research and into water governance policy making. How do you think all these things can fit together so that we can make local or indigenous knowledge become more valuable, become more influential in water governance policy making?

[21:07-21:51]
Karen: This is also something that I think about so much, and in particular with the initiatives that are moving forward with SUMERNET at the moment. Policy is such a tricky, sometimes fast-moving, and sometimes slow-moving space. It's really interesting to look at how policy changes. How have we learned from the Covid experience in terms of policy development as well? Here, we have these cycles in policy on one side, bring to the political cycle of wherever we're operating, and the leadership who's there? That's all happening in the background and then we have these external events and crises that push us into different states and push us out of equilibrium, maybe for reasons of progress or not depending on what's happening.

[21:51-23:51]
Karen: For me, a lot of it we have to do with leadership, and leadership, I don't look at as being the person at the top. I look at leadership as being the person who is able to form strong relationships in order to support a strong intention more than actually a direction. So, the intention that we set is around greater understanding of the complexity of issues, and being able to move ahead towards them. How do we each tap into our own leadership capability within organizations and outside of organizations to bring that intention into a state of being? For me, the first art of expressing leadership is embracing complexity and recognizing how complicated things really are, and finding where we can leverage our actions and our positions in order to do just a little bit better. And I'm one of the people who does believe that a million little things is more important than one big thing in a center has as much if not more impact than one big thing.

So, how can we all as individuals work to express our leadership with the intention of where we're going in order to move just a little bit in the right direction? And if we all do that, we're going to get somewhere, really exciting. And we are going to be able to influence policy, but also you have to ... you have to study its cycles, you have to tap into it. And you have to want to kind of join that. And policy excludes people who have families, or people who have don't have access to both technological or language or educational access to engage with that. So, we need to form partnerships and express our leadership through those partnerships with people who have this kind of knowledge in a respectful way to be able to support them to bring their voice, and to find the people who want to navigate through the hierarchies of the system within which we operate to be able to be heard, and to bring that intention and influence.

[23:52-23:50]
Rajesh: I would like to go to the wrap-up. Do you have any comments or things that I have missed? This is your chance to do so.

[23:51-25:07]
Karen: Yeah, there's a lot of mines explosives along the way for sure. But I think it's about a deeper understanding of power. And I know I say this quite regularly, and I have to say it again. It's about, you know, rethinking leadership, rethinking power, and thinking about power with dynamics of power within. And, you know, the agency that we have and the community that gives us power and how we can speak together, and it's not just the power over [someone].

And I think that ties also with a group dynamics, comments that I was making earlier. The more we can find ways to articulate and explore what's happening in terms of power, dynamics and relations, I think that's going to open up an opportunity.

We need to find ways to be a lot more transparent about the power dynamics that are at play in to work with them and to support each other through that. Because that's the minefield for me. You can get crushed so easily. If you have a great idea and you don't navigate the power dynamics in the political structures in order to bring that idea to the ears that need to hear it.

[25:09-25:31]
Rajesh: That's a good way to end this podcast because within knowledge co-creation, we do want to know how we can take it to policy and obviously it's not so easy. Karen, thank you so much for your insights, also from your work in the Mekong but also unpacking some really complex concepts. Thank you very much Karen.

[25:32-25:39]
Karen: My pleasure, I hope everybody who listens has an opportunity to learn and that's my goal here. So, let's learn together.