

SUMERNET “RESEARCH 4 ALL” PODCAST SERIES
EPISODE 7 – Co-creation of knowledges: Professor Kanokwan Manorom

Full transcript

[00:25-00:45]

Rajesh: Welcome everyone to this episode of the SUMERNET podcast series, “Research for all”. In this episode, we are looking at the co-creation of knowledges for water governance and water policymaking. And we are very happy to have with us today, Professor Kanokwan Manorom from Ubon Ratchathani University, Thailand. Welcome Professor Kanokwan.

[00:46-00:51]

Kanokwan: Thank you very much, Rajesh, for inviting me to be a part of the podcast.

[00:52-01:09]

Rajesh: It's so lovely to have you. We want to explore with you matters relating to your own work. We know you have been working on co-creation of knowledges in the Mekong Region. Can you briefly explain what co-creation of knowledge means? And how do you do it in practice?

[01:10-02:49]

Kanokwan: From our work over the past five years, particularly when we got budget from SUMERNET, we define co-creation of knowledges as the knowledge that's been co-produced together by co-creators.

Who are the co-creators? The co-creators include local peoples, villagers, particularly the marginalized groups, women, men, young peoples, the government officers, NGOs, representatives from CSOs, and local authorities. So, we produce knowledge together in order to use that particular knowledge that's been produced to influence the policy decision making. And also, I think creation of knowledge is practiced by unified stakeholders. And we need to create and adopt collective language. We need to have common understanding, common shared values of the issue that we are going to research, and to use the research findings to inform the policymakers. And in practice, I did the research in wetland management in Sisaket province of Thailand. And also I did the research with local people, and we co-produced the Mekong curriculum for youth by the community-based school in Ubon Ratchathani.

[02:50-03:06]

Rajesh: Thank you, Professor Kanokwan. The Mekong curriculum project is extremely interesting, but I will come to that later. Before that, just to clarify for our listeners, you use the term co-creation of *knowledges* in plural, not a single knowledge. Can you tell us why?

[03:07-03:52]

Kanokwan: We use knowledge with "s". It's a plural term, mean[ing] knowledge is not from a single group of people, but we need knowledges that come from different groups of people. Because we believe that knowledges can be constructed in many forms. The policymakers need more than one form of knowledges. In other words, policymakers need multiple forms of knowledges, multiple forms of experiences, multiple forms of practice, and then put them together for developing or formulating policies to cope with changes, particularly in environment.

[03:53-04:52]

Kanokwan: I would like to highlight the policy formulation using co-creation of knowledges. The policy formulation at the highest level of decision making and the policy information on the ground are not always synchronized because of the language and the power relation. The power relation means every actor has different convening power. It's very challenging. It doesn't mean every actor has equal opportunity or has equal power to negotiate. So, that's why we need to create a safe space for the powerless group to play a role, to express their voices, to express their concern, express the problem, and offer their solution. And the government should be open-minded and should allow them to talk and allow more space for them.

[04:53-05:26]

Kanokwan: So, the third space should be created by mediators who have been accepted by the government and by local people as well. We need to create this space in order to allow local people to freely express their concern and allow them to express their experience and allow them to share their knowledge that [has been] accumulated over generations. They're also expert as well as other experts. The project that has no voices from local people would create conflicts and also unintended consequences.

[05:27-06:03]

Rajesh: I'm glad that you mentioned policy and policymaking because I know that you're very active with your work in influencing policy. I've also wanted to talk about the gender hegemony over water policymaking that exists in the Mekong Region and the mainstream water discourse. It seems some viewpoints are more valued and privileged, for example, a dam may be valued for electricity. Now, in these types of situations where one certain knowledge system has a hegemony, how can local knowledge creation challenge these mainstream discourses or values?

[06:04-07:46]

Kanokwan: I think every sector has tyranny of majority in knowledge co-creation process. Some reports are more valued or privileged than others. This is the truth that I am facing when I have done research on co-creation of knowledges. But I would like to emphasize local knowledge matters.

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Why did I say that? Because local knowledge is produced by legitimate actors. I mean, local people are legitimate actors. When the government decides to plan, for example, when they need to do hydropower or large scale infrastructure development like irrigation, local people who are already there, they are potentially the groups who are going to get impacts from those developments. So, we need local views, local experience, [and] local knowledge. Local knowledge should be co-produced, should be communicated, [and] should be used to influence the overall policy cycle. So they should be eligible, especially in the context of fairness and inclusiveness under SDGs, or under CSR corporate social responsibility, or in the context of empowerment, or in the context of participation or governance. So, we need local knowledge to put in place as one key knowledge that the government should take it into consideration to support the decision making around hydropower issues.

[07:47-08:47]

Kanokwan: If the policies do not take local knowledge as one form of legitimate knowledge, the policy wouldn't be able to be legitimized. Or to be accepted by international communities regarding fairness, equality and inclusiveness. And also the government, or the powerful actor, should develop institutional landscape. It means regulation or dialogues, legal framework or policy forums. This institutional landscape allows [for a] diversity of voices or perspective, experience and knowledge. And the public forum should be social space or political space for local people or local knowledge to be inclusive in this space in order to construct legitimacy for local people and for local knowledge.

[08:48-09:01]

Rajesh: Thank you, professor Kanokwan. I am particularly interested in the practical aspects of this. And when you say promote local knowledge and you are talking of local spaces. Could you give us an example of one of these kinds of local spaces that you have promoted in the past?

[09:03-10:10]

Kanokwan: Local space here is a space constructed by local people joining hands with academic, CSOs, local authorities, even government from the provincial level. It's not just a place, but it is about a social learning process space for everyone, or what I call earlier, co-creators of knowledge. So, all the co-creators of knowledge [are] invited to be expressing their voices, their concern, and find a collective understanding about the issues, or agree to have collective languages, or the way how we implement the research methodology together, or the way how we verify the research outputs together, and use those common research finding together to inform the policy at local level, and trying to scale up the local knowledge for the policymakers at higher level.

[10:11-11:06]

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Kanokwan: You know, the language at the higher level of policies and the language we use at the academic communities and the language we use at local communities are totally different. So, we need to understand each other's language.

It doesn't mean everyone has to say everything in the same language. But of course, everyone has their own terminology to understand the same issue. That's why they have different or contested meanings of many things. But when you come to talk on particular research or on particular development projects that potentially impacts large area, large group of leaders, you need to have collective language, otherwise no one understands each other, and we create more conflict among co-creators of knowledge.

[11:07-11:21]

Rajesh: Because of your own experience at the local level, you have more than 20 years of working at the local level and on local knowledge. Can you give us an example of where you may have succeeded so that others may learn?

[11:21-13:00]

Kanokwan: I could give you three examples. The first one, I did the research on Pak Mun dam more than ten years ago. You know, the Pak Mun dam is the most controversial dam in Thailand's development history. So, I did research, and we collected local knowledge on ecology or livelihood related to the Mun River. We use local knowledge in our paper together with expert knowledge. We integrated local knowledge with expert knowledge from Department of Agriculture, department of Engineer, department of Forestry as well. So, we use integrative process to co-create knowledge, and they use local knowledge that mix together with expert knowledge. And I presented this kind of integrative knowledge to the former Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra. And then we proposed the solution to solve the Pak Mun dam problems. So, our research was accepted by the government. And this is the first time in Thailand that the government agreed to open the damn gate for at least four months to allow fish to come back from the Mekong to the Mun river, and allow local people to catch fish, and generate income. I consider it's quite successful. It opened rooms for local knowledge to put in place in a better level for decision making institution.

[13:01-14:30]

Kanokwan: The second one [is] wetland management in Rasi Salai in Srisaket province in Thailand. The Rasi Salai dam also affects a lot of people and wetlands. The Rasi Salai dam flooded two-third of the wetland area. And then we received the money from SUMERNET like five years ago. And then we apply co-creation of knowledges, and we invited local authorities, officers from irrigation departments at the provincial level, and we invited local people who've been affected by the dam, [and] experts on wetland issues to be part of the research project. And then we came up with a better way to manage with land together with other stakeholders. We proposed the eco-tourist management, and the concept of cultural tourism, inviting people outside to learn about sustainable wetland management. So, I consider it's quite useful for local

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people to use that knowledge. So, [people] started to realize that local knowledge on wetlands is very valuable, [and] recognized by the government officer. Because, you know, the Rasi Salai dam was built without the recognition of the wetland value.

[14:31-15:14]

Kanokwan: And the third case [is] about local knowledge, we just finished the Mekong curriculum being co-created by young people in the village and teachers and villagers from the community-based school in Kong Chiam, we call Ta-mui community based school, Ubon Ratchathani province. We developed the Mekong curriculum together. We've finished it, and we are testing it. It's an ongoing process. Even though the SUMERNET project ended, I, local people, and the school are going to co-develop in order to get the best version of the Mekong curriculum. And we expect to expand the curriculum to the neighboring school, to the formal school in the future.

[15:15-15:35]

Rajesh: In Rasi Salai, you made the people recognize that the term, wetlands, is important, that the term, “Pabung Patham” (ป่าบุงป่าทาม), was important. Before, it was called wastelands. So, tell us about naming. How does naming matter? And how can we take more of these local names to a public discourse?

[15:36-15:56]

Kanokwan: You know, as I said, language is very powerful. So language signifies meanings, connotes meanings. Meanings are not just single term, but plural terms. In the past, as you said, the government saw wetlands as wastelands, right? Nothing, it's useless. Why don't we build the dam, and we supply water for you to do better agricultural production. But you know, what does it mean by wetlands from local perspective? Wetlands is an official term. But local people, they use “Pabung Patham”, in forest areas and water area, for example, they mix together. So, wetlands mean supermarkets. They use the supermarkets terminology to explain the wetlands. They should go to get things from the market. And some people call it “banks”, “local banks”. You go to get the money. So, they collect stuff from the wetlands and they sell it for their income. And they use wetland for their daily life. And so they care, they protect their own wetlands in order to preserve it for future generation.

[15:57-17:27]

Kanokwan: And this is how they explain wetland to them, it's a supermarket. So the power of language is very important. So, that's why we need to cooperate or adopt collective language before we go further doing co-creation of knowledges. We need to have common value. What does it mean by wetlands from the co-creators, from the government, from local people, from academics?

[17:27-17:49]

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Rajesh: Excellent, Professor Kanokwan. That is extremely useful for us to understand how we not only need to recognize local knowledge, but also recognize the language in which knowledge is presented and how it is understood. I will look forward to hosting you again in a future podcast.

Kanokwan: Thank you so much.