

SUMERNET "RESEARCH 4 ALL" PODCAST SERIES  
EPISODE 9 - Flood risks and local participation: Dr. Yanyong Inmuong

Full transcript

[00:00:25 - 00:00:38]

**Rajesh:** Thank you very much Ajarn Yanyong for joining us in the SUMERNET Research for all podcast. In this episode, we want to explore things that your work is focusing on, especially on flood management.

[00:00:39 - 00:00:44]

**Prof. Yanyong:** Thank you, Rajesh. Yes, it's my pleasure to join this interview.

[00:00:45 - 00:01:00]

**Rajesh:** So, Ajarn Yanyong, you have been involved for many, many years, not just from SUMERNET, working with local communities in flood risk management in northeast Thailand. Can you tell us a little bit about your motivation. How did you come to do this work?

[00:01:01 - 00:01:34]

**Prof. Yanyong:** Yes, this work came up because of the colleagues in northeast Thailand who work in the department of disaster prevention and mitigation and the Regional Office of Water Resources as well as Baan Phai district government. One day, we get together and I listen to them about their need on kind of ways to cope with the urban flood because this storm coming to the northeast in recent years very often.

[00:01:35 - 00:02:09]

**Prof. Yanyong:** Many reports on flood incident around there because it's come across Vietnam, you know to Northeast Thailand. In recent years, the climate change caused a lot of changes on local climate and you know it caused the storm and people lost a lot of their properties and livestock. In 2019, the storm caused huge damage in Baan Phai in Khon Kaen.

[00:02:10 - 00:03:07]

**Prof. Yanyong:** It caused really severe flash flood in Baan Phai and they are very fear of that up to now. And that my team pay attention to this and whether we can help them both the government authority and the community out there and the flood victim, in particular. All teams then came together and discussed. And lastly, we agreed to explore and test a kind of participatory approach drawing on stakeholder to come together to find extra ways to cope with the flood, particularly the development of preparedness action and early warning system. We then send our proposal to somebody and luckily, we will be funded to do this joint action project. That is the story behind this.

[00:03:08 - 00:03:28]

**Rajesh:** Thank you very much and that explains how you got into this kind of work, which is very beneficial for flood risk management, just to give some background to our listeners, can you tell us a little bit more about policy and planning for flood risk management in Thailand in your view, do these planning efforts include local communities in general?

[00:03:29 - 00:04:08]

**Prof. Yanyong:** Yes, it's a good question. Typically, in Thailand and I believe in Southeast Asia, the flood mitigation and prevention policy and plan were formulated by the central authorities in the same way that was sent to the region and the provincial government until that was sent to or top-down plan was sent down to the local government. It is a top-down fashion for policy planning development policy and local community will not be included in the policy or implementation.

[00:04:09 - 00:04:34]

**Prof. Yanyong:** That means to implement the flood preparedness early warning, evacuating or even rehabilitation. All these activities are mainly done by the government authority. There is no space or room or any recommendation and participation from local community.

[00:04:35 - 00:05:07]

**Prof. Yanyong:** I think, in many places, I think now they try to develop a so-called participatory approach solution. It is to work with our stakeholders, particularly with those vulnerable communities and concerned government officials to explore the best way to deliver and develop a plan of action on flood preparedness and early warning system, that is most suitable for them to take action in coping with the flood.

[00:05:08 - 00:05:33]

**Rajesh:** I understand, and this is interesting because you have also said that usually the top-down planning happens and you're trying to do more from the ground up and you've said that it is a more participatory approach. Please tell us a little bit more about this. How do you think this is working better for flood risk management. And can you tell us what is different from the usual flood management when you do participatory action?

[00:05:34 - 00:05:59]

**Prof. Yanyong:** The participatory model or participatory approach is a core concept. While many development agencies internationally use this as a concept or tool to work with grassroots communities. It is to bring in key stakeholders to come to explore the ideas and ways to resolve the case.

[00:06:01 - 00:06:31]

**Prof. Yanyong:** The good example might be the participatory rural appraisal or PRA. This is used to merge a development plan of any case of interest that confronting the communities, such as how to transform into organic farm waste management solution etc. That the case hanging there in society, and they use the PRA to pave ways to resolve this case.

[00:06:32 - 00:06:53]

**Prof. Yanyong:** I think the flood poses high risks to vulnerable community. While the community know what suits their situation and capacity base on how to get prepared and even warning their own communities prior to the official reaching and helping them.

[00:06:54 - 00:07:11]

**Prof. Yanyong:** The usual convention of flood risk management plan does not include this point. The vulnerable communities could help themselves, but for the fact that come to them and that the loss whose we critically minimize, I think this is kind of the model.

[00:07:12 - 00:07:34]

**Rajesh:** The participatory action approach can it work for people after they have been affected? For example, if there is a flood, people may move, maybe their livelihood is damaged, their homes are damaged, and maybe some of them come to the city. So is this approach only for before the flood or do you think it can be for both before and after?

[00:07:35 - 00:08:03]

**Prof. Yanyong:** It can be both. The flood can be happening year before or after. Also, I think this can be applied to both. For example, if those communities were hit by the flood and they can bring that experience for learning and how to find way to resolve this again. The point is let them come together and discuss and explore ways to cope with it.

[00:08:04 - 00:08:17]

**Prof. Yanyong:** This is in contrast to the conventional one. The decision maker will do that the job don't ask the victim or impacted communities to send out any recommendations. The decision maker knows best how to do it.

[00:08:18 - 00:08:38]

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**Rajesh:** Thank you, Ajarn. So this is it's very clear. Now you're bringing communities together and I think in those activities you're able to empower communities. And as you say, you're building the action for flood mitigation and flood risk management. Can you give us some examples of these learning activities that they have had to share and exchange knowledge and experience?

[00:08:39 - 00:09:23]

**Prof. Yanyong:** In our joint action project here, we really must focus on this learning activity. We bring them together and let them share their experience during the flood even what they do, what they do with their family, what they try to escape or do something and help those relatives and family members, things like that. We also let them know about the concept and practice of community-based disaster risk management, which kind of lets the community to do it together.

[00:09:24 - 00:10:01]

**Prof. Yanyong:** We show them good examples of the flood early warning system. We let them talk and explain their views on their experience and action against the heavy flood. We let them propose their will in coping with the future flood and let the committee draw a kind of flood risks map to show the risks area and inflow and outflow of water. These were done in five communities and eventually achieved the agenda and recommendation proposed to the local government and authority for further policy and planning development.

[00:10:02 - 00:10:19]

**Prof. Yanyong:** This is a kind of learning and then finally, getting some common ideas and concepts and proposed action to the local government for further planning by the local government.

[00:10:20 - 00:10:40]

**Rajesh:** Thank you, Ajarn. Of course, all of what you're saying is extremely relevant to the larger Mekong because obviously climate change is making these storms more frequent and floods more frequent. So when you talked of the tools for the flood early warning, which is really very useful for many communities in the Mekong. Can you give us an example of some of these tools?

[00:10:41 - 00:11:35]

**Prof. Yanyong:** Basically, we start with let them learn from the kind of application, mobile application, with the weather forecast, things like that. And there are a lot of applications available online and let them play with it and [see] which one they like best. And also let them know about mapping the risks areas and draw a kind of flood map which is another tool for which areas are high risks and where to evacuate to any high land when the heavy floods come. When the water level is rising up to a certain level, this is the high risks, marking which pillar and let them see that whether this is safe.

[00:11:36 - 00:12:16]

**Prof. Yanyong:** Using a kind of local resource familiar with in the neighborhood they can use for a kind of warning for themselves. Do not show them using drone or something higher tech because they are really poor, most of the vulnerable communities are urban poor groups. They cannot buy any kind of high technology or cut or equipment. But they agree that they're happy to kind of make use of any local valuable resort at hands that they see that more appropriate.

[00:12:17 - 00:12:47]

**Rajesh:** That is so important because early warning systems, they don't only have to work, they also have to be affordable. Especially, for local communities who are sometimes, I guess, living on a daily wage, that's a really important point you made. We want to look at how these efforts can be transformed into policy. And we know that your work was very important for that, for the policy outreach. Can you tell us if there were any policy successes from this project and how you are influencing flood management policy making?

[00:12:48 - 00:13:24]

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**Prof. Yanyong:** I think it is a good tip though, like it is from the right start of the Joint Action project, we bring in boundary partners who are regional government officer, provincial district officer, they're working with us from the start. They understand the problem out there so that means from the right side, they tend to be not much hesitant in this because they've been familiar with the top-down mindset.

[00:13:24 - 00:14:05]

**Prof. Yanyong:** So when it is ongoing for more than a year, they tend to change their concept or mindset, start to change, and accept some new bottom-up thoughts that are suggested or proposed by those community, particularly the flood victims' group. Then we organize many meetings that let the community leader present. For example, like we work with community officials and committee leaders to collect information in the family household or using survey information.

[00:14:06 - 00:14:43]

**Prof. Yanyong:** We use the questionnaire. We work together and lastly, we analyze information, and we discuss the results together with committee leaders. And we let the committee leader to present the result with us to the policymaker. This is a much-changed situation. The policy leader, provincial government and regional government, next come to reorganize a policy seminar or forum and let the committee present those proposed actions to the governments at all levels.

[00:14:44 - 00:15:19]

**Prof. Yanyong:** We invite the national decision maker to come and discuss the agenda of action and it comes up with those policy or planners' decisionmakers. They see the benefit and start to change their mind and accept this proposal from the community and come up with Baan Phai local government, which started to change and improve its flood mitigation policy and plan.

[00:15:20 - 00:15:41]

**Prof. Yanyong:** The national government now try to find ways or include this committee action into the national plan. I think this is the kind of, not influence, but impact on changing of policy and action at national, regional and provincial and even district and local level.

[00:15:42 - 00:16:01]

**Rajesh:** This is quite important because before we go to changing in policy, we have to change practice and as you said, also attitude [and] thinking and to change from top-down to bottom-up thinking This was interesting for the rest of the Mekong Region to learn. Do you plan or have you had people from other Mekong countries visit you and share these lessons?

[00:16:02 - 00:16:28]

**Prof. Yanyong:** Yes, there are some. For example, like I'm lucky that our project quite delayed or because of the COVID and then we just try to complete our project just last month. Now we try to analyze and sum up the result. If you got it, it's quite delayed because we work with the committee, and the government does not allow us to make any meetings with communities along the way.

[00:16:29 - 00:17:15]

**Prof. Yanyong:** We have many interesting groups in Vietnam and the national government because I think that the national government of Thailand, they discuss with colleagues in disasters sector in Southeast Asia and then they mentioned our cases to Vietnam government also Cambodia. I think in East Asia is some country. I think Bangladesh for example. I think it's from the voice of decision makers in Thailand. They mentioned us and we still need your support in the kind of write up results or any articles to distribute publicly to those any interesting groups or bodies.

[00:17:16 - 00:17:31]

**Rajesh:** Definitely. As I said, we have to support because these are also on the ground solutions. These are not only research, but you're actually affecting communities and how they live and how they cope with floods and in the future is going to be more and more important, so we really want to support this important work.

[00:17:32 - 00:17:39]

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**Rajesh:** So I am finished with our podcast questions Ajarn. If you have anything to add or you want to emphasize, feel free to do now.

**[00:17:40 - 00:18:17]**

**Prof. Yanyong:** I need to thank SUMERNET though, I would like to thank very much on this to supporting us. And you know and so extension of the project time as we get stuck with the COVID and it's terrible and indeed, but we could overcome it until at the end and we get a kind of successful and even the really small project but its kind of delivering a lot of impact at national level. We don't think that we have just gone at it far to impact regionally.

**[00:18:18 - 00:18:51]**

**Prof. Yanyong:** In the first place, we think just only the local government in Baan Phai so it's fine to help the people there but it happened like unbelievable. We don't think this will happen and what we dream is that we see next step that SUMERNET will take this to coin more activities in research like this and that will be a big help of communities, who suffer an impact from any disasters and consequences.

**[00:18:52 - 00:19:33]**

**Prof. Yanyong:** Another thing is that we are dreaming that whether we would like to see whether in our region and in Thailand in particular, whether we could have the village or community for flood risks management plan. This is the kind of critical one so we have only now the local government flood risks management policy and plans, and Baan Phai is trying to update to include communities' actions but if we could develop the committee base there to cope with the floods and the government will support their needs on the other way around.

**[00:19:34 - 00:19:51]**

**Prof. Yanyong:** This is a kind of self-help or self-reliance in the long-term promise that we would like to see that and we would like SUMERNET to listen and think of this if it's possible to support in this in any places you know even in Mekong Region or any regions in Asia.

**[00:19:52 - 00:20:13]**

**Rajesh:** Definitely Ajarn, because last year there were huge floods in Ubon Ratchathani. I think these are areas that really need this kind of research, this kind of lessons and sharing.