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Mt Sinabung and the Karo: How Cultural Aspects Shape Resilience

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Abstract

“Culture is a major factor influencing how people and organizations deal with disasters and yet it is often ignored” (IFRC,2014). In a world where one out of three people is exposed to earthquakes, around 1 billion are threatened by floods and 414 million live near one of the 220 most dangerous volcanoes (European Commission Joint Research Centre, 2017), religions and beliefs play a fundamental role both positively, increasing security and resilience, and negatively developing vulnerabilities. The main assumption of this paper is that if special care is not given to local social capital, community potential and more in general traditions, mainly in the phase of preparedness and early recovery, the context could be misinterpreted, resilience could be never achieved and aid interventions could be failing the humanitarian goal of alleviating suffering.

Keywords: *Social culture, disaster;*

1. Introduction

During the past decades, the number of disastrous events has increased constantly everywhere in the world. The Asia-Pacific area alone has been impacted, since 1970, by more than 5000 disasters causing ~~something like-around~~ two billion deaths and affecting more than six billion people (ESCAP, 2015). Indonesia is the fourth most populated nation and one of the most prone country to natural hazards in the world, ranked 67th according to the INFORM 2017 risk index (PreventionWeb, 2017). Because of its position on the so called “ring of fire”, a series of three tectonic plates (Indo-Australian, Eurasian and Pacific) which move and cause 90% of the world’s earthquake (CNN, n.p.), this archipelago is vulnerable to many natural catastrophes such as floods, tsunami and earthquake. Furthermore, there are 127 volcanoes in the whole country, some of which are frequently erupting. The combination of location and climate phenomena hit on average 650,000 people annually (OCHA, 2017). Considering that the number of natural hazards and climate change related damages are not going to decrease with time, on the contrary are probably going to raise, and that Indonesia is one of the country with the highest number of ethnic groups and internal diversity elements, consisting of around 300 distinct ethnic groups and 742 different languages and dialects (Birkmann, 2008), extrapolating examples of cultural driven behaviours of people and culturally sensitive (or not) programs, can only improve the disaster management and risk reduction competences. In fact, any documented experiences of people affected by hazards is unique and essential to create a disaster-proof nation. Furthermore, it is

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important to remember that Indonesian disaster management policy has been targeting mainly the physical causes of vulnerability and as a consequence material reconstruction, but has almost completely lacked an extra attention to the social capital recovery (Lutfiana, 2013). This paper shows to the humanitarian sector that the so called vulnerable people could also be able to bounce back and build their life better than before, if a major attention to their specificity was given. Moreover, as the World Humanitarian Summit of 2016 declared, it is time to come together and cooperate to put the beneficiaries at the centre as the first resource for their recovery. One step in doing so is investigating how their culture influence their resilience and coping mechanism and exploiting that knowledge to create *ad hoc* programs.

2. Culture and Resilience theories

In the past few years, the humanitarian sector started to formalize the evergreen idea that aid cannot be successful without being implemented in a culturally sensitive manner. Communities everywhere in the world are still suffering from predictable disasters, also because organizations are not addressing society's diversity while planning interventions and are not considering resilience, vulnerability and hazards as socially built consequences of disasters (Krüger et al, 2015). From a macro sociological perspective of disaster management, in order to achieve cultural resilience, the community needs to be perceived as a set of “social relations, combinations of mutual practices, systems of power and resources access, systems of social roles, social functions, cultural meanings, and ties of support and trust among the local population, immigrants and the institutional agencies” (Lucini, 2014 p. 154). When these features are recognized, then the study of risks and how to prevent them is not going to remain prerogative of only academic researchers, primarily anthropologists, but is going to belong to an interdisciplinary domain (Krüger et al., 2015). Having a clear picture of the beneficiaries’ rationale and their origins helps designing activities which will permeate into the everyday life and will not be considered as temporary impositions from outsiders unable to grasp the situation. Culture is a powerful feature of human life which can either hinder or support population’s coping mechanisms.

2.1 Conceptualization of culture

The addition of culture, which is embedded in the organizational structure of every society, to the sphere of disaster management and resilience, is not actually simplifying the understanding of this subject. In fact, there is not one single explanation of culture as there is not one single definition of resilience. According to Hoffman (Maldonado, 2016) culture is an always changing process in a dynamic state, as the adaptation practices conducted by populations prone to disasters for millennia have proved, with both visible, explicit and intangible, tacit aspects (Maldonado, 2016). Culture is a liquid concept that flows and influences every single aspect of human existence from market to relations, from economy to governance. The complexity of culture is added to the chaos of dealing with disasters, making it harder to agree on a clear definition which outlines explicit guidelines. However, if this step of connecting culture and catastrophe is not performed,

since risk and disaster are to some extent themselves social and cultural constructions, then the magnitude of the situation cannot be fully grasped. In fact, people shape their environment to contain the risk of the area they are accustomed to live in. This type of active and creative adaptation is caused by the repetitiveness, level of damage and the predictability of a hazard. The element of constant recurrence of risk as almost historical, is an interesting driver of cultural change, able to be more than just destructive, but also transformative in the area of politics, economics and society (Krüger et al., 2015). So, on one side there are aspects of culture which makes it a dynamic and liquid feature of every society, but on the other side there are characteristics of the same culture that, no matter what, will not change because they represent the core identity of that society. In other words, if bigger circumstances force the population to transform that central element, this would strongly impact the very identity of the society which undertook the variation. Therefore, for the purpose of this paper, culture, as local beliefs, religion, language, social habits, communication, set of traditions, behaviours, customs, is defined in its double nature with the words of Hufford:

“Culture—the multitude of ways in which we accomplish community life and values— connects us to others within dynamic local, national, and global frameworks. Cultural ideas, forms, and patterns powerfully inform our participation in collective life at each level, maintaining identities within larger constantly fluctuating systems” (Hufford 2016 cited in Maldonado, 2016 p. 53).

2.2 *Conceptualization of resilience*

The origin of the word resilience, from the Latin *resilio* (Manyena, 2006), literally the ability to “resile from” or “spring back from” a shock (UNISDR, 2009), comes from the physical science and is used to describe the capacity of certain elements to come back at their original state of equilibrium in case of imposed stress (Barrios, 2014). It was introduced for the first time in the disaster realm in the late 1970’s early 1980’s and was strictly connected with the ability to absorb and recover from catastrophic events (CARRI, 2013). Since then multidisciplinary definitions have been produced from a combination of sectors. The most widely recognized, relevant and unifying among humanitarian workers in the field of disaster risk management which embrace the diversity of meaning, is the one provided by the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (MacAskill, Guthrie, 2014):

“Resilience is the ability of a system, community or society exposed to hazards to resist, absorb, accommodate to and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner, including through the preservation and restoration of its essential basic structures and functions” (UNISDR, 2009, p.24).

This definition is relevant not only for disaster risk reduction activities, but also for early recovery practices which are themselves a valuable mean to implement disaster risk reduction measures and for the “build back better” approach, described by the very UNISDR as:

“The restoration, and improvement, where appropriate, of facilities, livelihoods and living conditions of disaster-affected communities, including efforts to reduce disaster risk factors” (UNISDR, 2009 p.23).

Despite its wide acceptance, the UNISDR definition remains one in a million description of what humanitarian and development practitioners mean with such complex topic. For the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, resilience equals “the amount of change a system can undergo without changing state” (Kindra, 2013). This definition is supported by the vision of the UK Department for International Development which describes it as “the ability of countries, communities and households to manage change, by maintaining or transforming living standards in the face of shocks or stresses... without compromising their long-term prospects” (Kindra, 2013). Meanwhile UNDP sees it in terms of a “transformative process of strengthening the capacity of people, communities and countries to anticipate, manage, recover and transform from shocks” (Kindra, 2013). In this way, the organization is underlining the dynamic feature of resilience which goes beyond the single practical temporal result, but touches upon themes such as confidence, organization for the future, gender equality etc. The particularity of these diverse definitions is the series of contrasts characterizing them. For some academic, resilience is an ontological feature of the community as an inherited ability to do something which emerge when crisis come, while for others it is a phenomenological process constantly built over time; or again it has been seeing as adaptation towards difficulties of existence through change, but also as resistance to those adversities through fighting this change (CARRI, 2013).

2.3 *Characteristics of a resilient community*

Despite this added complexity, the idea of interpreting and making sense of a disaster under the lengths of culture remains intriguing because of its functionality. In fact, it gives the opportunity to clarify matters and actions, which could otherwise appear to outsiders as pure result of irrationality (IFRC, 2014). Some examples of this immediately inexplicable attitudes are the strong emotional attachment to hometowns, the mindset towards livelihoods, gender roles, the links within a community, all characteristics which push people to opt for living in a commonly-considered dangerous area instead of being safe in a land of strangers. When humanitarian organizations do not consider in advance the peculiarity of a culture while planning for DRR activities and early recovery, they might be overwhelmed by the failure of common assumptions and institutionalised practices and instead be surprised by the success of unconventional, exceptional and creative responses (Krüger et al., 2015). As described above the origins of the term resilience lies in the realm of physics. Consequently, it is described by a series of assumptions which are not the most reasonable to talk about the social world. First of all, the expectation that a society can return to normalcy, e.g. to the situation prior the disaster (considering the very pre-event state as fixed), is a false starting point to analyse the human world from. In fact, according to anthropological studies, individuals have proven to be the opposite of a

stable subject, even when the communities appear to be the bearer of ancient traditions there is always a degree of change. Moreover, the resilience narrative which underlines this idea of going back to the previous situation, it completely removes the political and historical processes that constitute the very vulnerabilities which caused the impact of the disaster to be a major one (Barrios, 2016). Anyways, it is important to bear in mind that the key to face such big scale phenomena is having an open mind and able to recognize that there is not a single truth. Only one entity cannot decide for everyone in terms of what is an acceptable adaptation which interventions can facilitate, but there is an urge to see beyond one's biased perception of the world. In fact, disasters are not comparable to hazards:

“Disasters are historically shaped processes that involve human practices and development policies”
(Barrios, 2016, p 28).

Being that human resilience is a complex phenomenon, organizations need to pay attention to many key components that enable its achievement. According to the work “rights for resilience” by Walsh-Dilley et al. (2013), the first aspect to consider is diversity in the broadest meaning, as environment, type of risk and livelihood of communities, because being dependent to a single perspective decrease the number of options and sources of knowledge to deal with distress. Instead it increases the amount of mechanisms and routes available to build back better someone's existence (Walsh-Dilley et al., 2013). The ability to take lessons from previous experience is also a resilient characteristic aiming at adaptation. It is there that the organizations, through the engagement with civil society and governmental institutions, can best include: from one side, creative solutions from local knowledge and from the other side, best practices from global education. Furthermore, the government sensitive involvement is core to resilience success, because if the institutions are not flexible in their procedure and are not strongly synchronized with locals, effective governance will not be recognized by the population and resources will be misallocated (Walsh-Dilley et al., 2013). The lessons learned mentioned before are the basis for the subsequent block constituting resilience, namely preparedness and planning. The awareness that systems are never ready enough, because there are always unforeseeable consequences to hazards and because of the extreme ecological and social volatility, is the engine for a good DRR and early recovery mechanism together with the acknowledgment that structural inequalities as for example gender issues need always to be taken into account (Nelson et al., 2007). Finally, much of the literature underlines the weight that social capital, in terms of social networks and norms, trust, solidarity, shared values and thus behaviours, has in giving the community that push to seek recovery right after a collective trauma (Walsh-Dilley et al., 2013). These social relations and mechanisms inherited by generations are unique characteristics of communities prior the hazards and can be beneficial to the whole group. In some other definitions communities are never stationary, but living in a continuous state of change their being is shaped by surrounding dynamics which also influence the way affected communities, local government and relief organizations relate with each other. Like resilience and culture, social capital is a broad-meaning concept. According to the words of Bourdieu reported by Barrios (2014) social capital is:

“The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships in mutual acquaintance and recognition [. . .] which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital” (Bourdieu, 1986 cited in Barrios, 2014 p. 332)”

According to Woolcock (Lutfiana et al., 2013) the social capital could be contained into three types: the more bonding ties which connects family members and close friends, the bridging connections which built a linkage among groups from diverse origins, but similar political and economic level and linking social capital which bonds communities with influential institutions such as banks. The poorer you are the fewer are your linking social capital which is the most useful for improvements in the economic field and development (Lutfiana et al., 2013). According to this vision, any stakeholders involved in any phases of disaster management should underline the importance of those social networks, thus determine the needs based on social understanding of the organization of a community. In fact, although might be poor in terms of physical resources and might need support, a population with rooted and strong social structures is better equipped to cope with the effects of a shock and in general to perform in any sectors, from political to economic (Lutfiana et al., 2013).

3. Culture and resilience in disasters

3.1 Context matters and people at the centre

The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 is the proof of this humanitarian sector guidelines direction. Shifting the attention from an immediate and more short-term disaster management or response to a durable and sustainable disaster risk management, both in terms of preparedness and early recovery, gives higher chances to cultural aspects to be considered. The successor of the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015 is embracing the challenges of bouncing back better (Matyas, Pelling, 2015) through stressing the urgency of tackling also the hidden disaster risk drivers such as: the consequences of poverty and inequality; cultural driven behaviours like an extreme attachment to a specific livelihood; climate change; rapid urbanization etc. (United Nations, 2015). In fact, it is not possible for societies to simply go back to how things were before a major disaster occurs, because human beings are able of critical thinking and learning from the past (Matyas, Pelling, 2015). Another point, which is adding to the importance of a cultural perspective of disaster reduction and resilience growth, is the people-centred, multi-sectoral and inclusive approach to disaster risk. According to this view, non-governmental organizations as well as governments themselves have to engage with the stakeholders targeted and interested in their programmes and policies namely with the beneficiaries and the most vulnerable among them (United Nations, 2015). Often the series of ideas, assumptions, attitudes, feelings, experiences, values and narratives, from which community-shared complex behaviours and actions originate, can be an obstacle to survival and can actually be one of the causes of a community or household struggle to cope with catastrophes (Krüger et al., 2015).

How people construct priorities and evaluate hazards is also connected to their indigenous knowledge, to their traditions and beliefs. That is why there is no space anymore for a limited conceptualization of DRR and disaster response, but the resolutions must be derived from a wide variety of interdisciplinary fields (Krüger et al., 2015). Nowadays also international entities such as the World Bank, United Nations Development Group and European Union have taken the steps to recognize the role of culture in disasters and the presence of invisible aspects of it, but too many times this awareness has not given to locals, the space to guide their own recovery. The problem of practices which do not consider culture persists, because of the very superficial objectification of culture (Maldonado, 2016). Many organizations share a common understanding, which derives from rationality and science, about what concerns people when natural hazards strike. Outsiders might see risks differently than affected communities, thus imposing an unnecessary behavioural change. In fact, the international aid machinery usually has a prearranged set of interventions, probably established in a headquarter in the western part of the world, which is normally applied for those situations, depriving space for diversity in risk acknowledgment. The danger here is that lack of local ownership, misperception of community benefits, assumptions of society's unity and uncomplete stakeholders' inclusion, caused by the ignorance of power dynamics, would affect the whole programme rate of success. The risk here is forcing beneficiaries to act against what they believe in and are interested in from a cultural or simply a benefit prospective, either because organizations think they know better or because they have conducted community approach. On the other side when hazards are more frequent, people might start a narrative of normalization of the threat giving own explanations for events to happen which clash with the experts' rational view.

3.2 localization and people at the centre

It is important to recognize the power relations that aid can construct and sustain which is also supported by the constant media communication of a single affected people's stereotypical label, diverting attention from the underlying endemic problems and perpetuating a frame of victimization (Maldonado, 2016). A possible solution to stop overlooking the various visions of risk is starting to increase the local ownership of humanitarian interventions, including stakeholders who because of structural injustice and asymmetric power relations are usually left out from policymaking. This last concept has been underlined in the World Humanitarian Summit, an international, inclusive, multi stakeholders' consultation process, called by the Secretary General Ban ki-moon, with the unique mission to unanimously outline the transformative vision of a restored humanity in which the people who are suffering from the numerous complex crisis worldwide is put at the centre of any future humanitarian actions (WHS, 2016). In this meeting, many minds put together the vision of resilience as "the solution and the hope for people in new or prolonged crises, through collective action by humanitarian, development and other partners, to strengthen people's resilience to crises, by investing in preparedness, managing and mitigating risk, reducing vulnerability, finding durable solutions for protracted displacement, and adapting to new threats" (IFRC, 2014). In order to reach this global goal, aid organizations and any stakeholders involved in dealing with disasters need to approach DRR and in

general disaster management taking into account culture, by addressing unconventional frames of reference which take inspiration from psychology, anthropology, behavioural economics, sociology, public health etc. to create a comprehensive people centred and context and culturally sensitive interventions (IFRC, 2014).

4. Discussion

4.1 Mt Sinabung context

The northern part of Sumatra island, more specifically the Karo regency, houses one of the most active volcano in Indonesia, Mt Sinabung (Map 1). On 29th August 2010, after centuries of inactivity, this allegedly dormant volcano of type B (non-active) erupted and has not stopped since then. As a consequence, the regency government of Karo and the North Sumatra Disaster Mitigation Agency, the Local Disaster Management Agency (BPBD), which is responsible in case of disaster for the issuing of policies at the local level, made an official declaration of a local emergency which is the lowest of the three levels of emergency

that the government can announce (Enia, 2016).

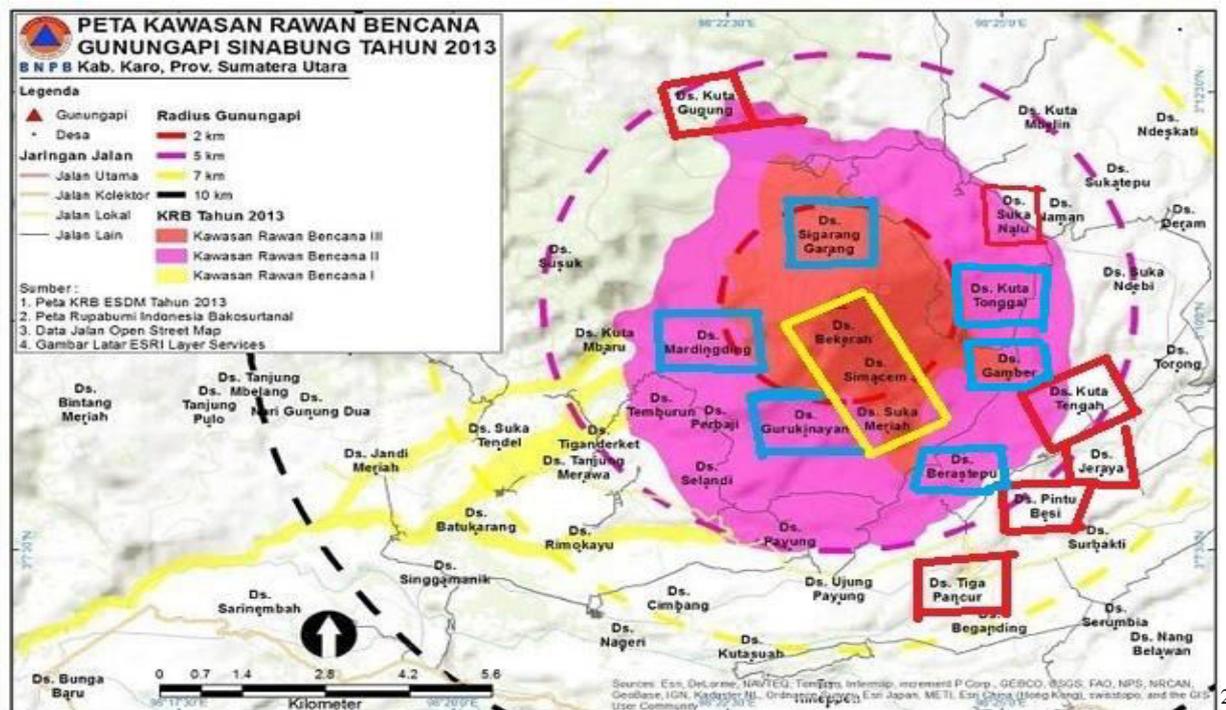


1

In 2013, the Volcanology and Geological Hazard Mitigation Centre (CVGHM) raised the alert status at level 4, the highest danger

(Global Volcanism Program, 2014; Enia, 2016). This led to temporary forced evacuation of around 40 villages, all of which were located within 6km radius of the volcano, and to the destruction of 3 of them: Sukemeriah, Bekerah and Simacem, located within 3km from the crater. Moreover, it was only on the 22nd January 2014 that the BPBD of Tanah Karo District was finally established with limited resources and capacity. This proved the low degree of organization in terms of disaster management of the area (OED-FAO, 2017). At the end of January 2014, 28,715 people left their homes, but since June 2015, despite the alert status remained at the highest level, the number of internally displaced persons (IDP)s has shrunk to 7,250 people (OCHA, 2017). The CVGHM warned the villagers and tourists not to enter the 3km radius from the summit and banned any activities within 7km in the south-southeast sector, 6km in the southeast-east sector and 4km in the north-east sector (Jakartapost, 2017). Nevertheless, the instability of the situation killed 15 people in 2014 (OCHA, 2014) and another 7 in 2016 (Sagala, Sullivan, 2016) and created three categories of evacuees. Map 2, below, represents the area hit by the eruptions and the colours surrounding

village's names divide them into those three groups. The colour yellow stands for the villages which have been completely or largely destroyed, 370 households. The inhabitants have been relocated in Siosar in permanent houses (Government of Indonesia, 2016). The light blue shows those which are supposed to be relocated independently, around 1.903 households. Finally, the colour red underlines those villages temporarily evacuated in shelters (around 2.592 households), whose inhabitants are still spread in 8 of those shelters, because they are only allowed to go back to their villages once the alert status of the volcano has reduced (OED-FAO, 2017).



Before the disaster, the land around Mt. Sinabung was rich and fertile making Sumatra a leading producer of paddy, peanut, lettuce, tomato, chilli, cabbage, potatoes, oranges and especially corn. Since 2010 the ash has covered tens of thousands of hectares and gas ruined the crops causing, by December 2014, an economic decline of around **Rp** 1.49 Trillion (OED-FAO, 2017) and particularly **Rp** 712.2 billion decline in yields. In the district capital, Medan, prices of some products rose of 100% (Enia, 2016). Livestock of cows, buffalos, sheep, pigs, chickens and ducks was the second most common income activity and, because of the eruptions and evacuations, many cattle had to be sold for a low price or left dying behind (FAO, 2017). Heavy damages hit, not only the economic sector but, according to the Mount Sinabung Post-Disaster Action Plan 2015-2017, also the infrastructure one. This appears to be the most affected sector with 9.212 units ruined among permanent, semi-permanent and non-permanent housing, causing **Rp**. 480,21 billion of damages (US\$ 36,56 million) and **Rp**. 25,69 billion of losses (US\$ 1,96 million) (Wulandari, 2017). Concerning infrastructures, because of eruptions and lahar floods, in land transportations together with irrigation systems were ruined, causing even more issues as the sedimentation provoked silting in the cold lahar path, potentially expanding the hazard zone. Finally, in the public sector the inconveniences were numerous; to

² Map 2 (Global Volcanism Program, 2014)

mention some of them school children and teenagers had to cover long distance to get education, credit unions and farmer cooperatives stopped working, government documents went missing and many public buildings, including health facilities, had their tin roof corroded by volcanic ashes and were out of service (Wulandari, 2017).

4.2 *Karo culture*

Batak is an appellation created to differentiate the pagan inhabitants of Bukit Barisan mountain range from the Malays, Muslim lowlanders of the coastal area (Steadly, 1993). Initially the division was solely a geographical and topographical one. In fact, during the pre-colonial era, there were both genealogical and economic links created by the trade networks and by the movement of people, mainly workers. However, with the establishment of the first tobacco plantation, which signed the beginning of the Dutch physical presence in Sumatra, 1863, and with the 19th century's Islamization, growing education and culture unity, the Malay elite started to treat highlanders as human resources in terms of slaves and wives (Bonatz et al., 2009). As in many other parts of the world colonial Europeans ignored the previous social and economic alliances between highlanders and lowlanders, imposing their own division of Sumatra. From that moment, the term Batak started to be connected to economic and social inequalities and to have a negative connotation shaping the stereotype of uncivilized, savage, isolated, cannibal and outsider Batak (Bonatz et al., 2009). Among the 6-8 million of Batak living in north Sumatra in the area between Aceh and Minangkabau, there are six different groups Karo, Angkola, Mandailing, Pakpak, Simalungun and Toba (C. Kushnick, 2006).

Clan and kinship

The Karo are a clan based and agriculture centred society (C. Kushnick, 2006). The main Patri-clan composing Karo society are 5 *merga*: Ginting, Karo-karo, Perangin-angin, Sembiring and Tarigan. Those clans are not corporate groups made up of members with the same apical ancestor or same origins (Steadly, 1993). Nevertheless, every Karo is part of one clan by birth and within the same clan and sub-clan, members call each other brothers and sisters (Slaat, Portier, 1992). The totality of those clans determines the entire order of social life which is known as *Merga Si lima* (the five clans) (Universitas Sumatera Utara, n.p.). There is no hierarchy among clans, nor discrimination, nor special status according to which clan the individual belongs to, except for the sub-clan of the village founder which has higher social, ceremonial and legal status. The way this groups are connected to each other's is through marriages which cannot occur between members of the same clan (Slaat, Portier, 1992). As already said the kinship system is a complex twine of relations which creates a network of agnates and affine. The most important connections are the ones among: *Sukut* (*Senina* or *Sembuyak*) agnate, person sharing male ancestors, *Kalimbubu* wife-giver and *Anak-Beru* wife-receiver. What the Karo society aims at, is to create and maintain the unity of *Sangkep si telu*, meaning the completeness of the three who holds together the entire society: *kalimbubu* is the head, *senina* the stomach and *anakberu* the legs, because they serve both other groups. These entities are so

intertwined that if one has a reason to suffer everybody does, that is why they constantly help each other in order to reinforce their unity (G. Van den steenhoven, 1973). An example is the idea of *aron* which is the ancient system of mutual assistance composed by a voluntary group of farmers, usually neighbours or relatives, who will work together the land of each member to gain the greatest results in the fastest time (Universitas Sumatera Utara, n.p.; History of culture, 2011). Today, *aron* as mutual assistance, is not that common anymore and is just used for yearly celebrations, but it has assumed another significance as daily labour. The fundamental relation between *anakberu* and *kalimbubu* consists in a connection installed through marriage and involves all the agnates of the married couple and produces a series of duties and rights for both parties. On one side, the *anakberu* have to tire themselves (*si latih*) offering respect, services, financial support and labour during ceremonies hosted by the *kalimbubu*. On the other side *kalimbubu* who are the visible God (*dibata niidah*) will bring prosperity, blessings and wellbeing to the wife-receiver group. Moreover, the *kalimbubu* are responsible for the continued existence of the clan through the children born from the woman received by *anakberu* (C. Kushnick, 2006). Everyone can be at the same time *kalimbubu*, *anakberu* and *senina* of someone else giving the Karo society a feature of egalitarianism (Slaat, Portier, 1992). The series of rules, behaviours and actions directly influenced by those regulations which shape the kinship system are called *adat* and are at the foundation of Karo integrity and social life coherence. Those *adat* have not been fixed guidelines through centuries, but have been adapting to the changes and instability of Karo surrounding environment, from the Malays and Europeans political, economic and religious impositions to the Indonesian state social and religious invasive agenda (Steadly, 1993). Connected to *adat* there are *rebu*, meaning taboo, which have to be followed by every member of the society otherwise he or she will be considered impolite and disrespectful to the community and the ancestors. Most of these prohibitions relate to the relationship between male and female from one's kinship (mother in law and son in law, father in law daughter in law etc.). For example, it is forbidden: to address each other directly, but they need to use the third person to communicate or they need an intermediary; to sit face to face and look each other into the eyes; to touch any body parts unless the person is ill (Marbun, 2009).

Decision making

In Karoland usually settlements between parties or individuals, which do not concern everyone, such as wedding or birth ceremonies, are carried out by *runggu*.

“*Runggu* can be defined as institutionalized process of formal deliberation and decision-making by consensus within a group of people who, because of the kinship ties between them, *senina*, *ankberu* and *kalimbubu*, form a unity (*sangkep si telu*)” (Slaat, Portier, 1992 p.46).

Even if this practice still exists, it is not the only option available; people are also using regular state courts. Because of the high number of participant, it is hard to reach a conclusion and strictly implement it. For this reason, people tend to use also the official governmental channel which bypass the community ideas, mainly when is about land issues. On the other hand, the fact that kinship decisions can be in the hands of

government officials who do not belong to any clans push Karo to make the most of this ancient tradition and “keep the matter at home” (Slaat, Portier, 1992). Through these deep discussions, Karo individuals are underlying their unity as society, where each person wishes and opinions are appreciated and weighted according to their ability to contribute for the common good. The overall goal of this discussion is always aiming at the community’s harmony in every stage of their development as a living unit according to the concept of *kebulatan kehendak* meaning the roundness of the wills or ideas which represents the wisdom of communal decisions (Van den steenhoven, 1973). Another proof of this communal characteristic typical of Karo villages is the very building called *Jambur*, literally men’s gathering, an important communal facility built at the centre of the village and used for all sort of customary deliberations and traditional ceremonies such as weddings or funerals.

Women

Karo community, as already mentioned, is based on kinship system which is described by the literature as patrilineal predominant. Women are traditionally the only one responsible for the private sphere which includes children, husband and finances care. Since they are young, Karonese girls are thought to help their mothers or grandmothers with domestic issues in order to gain craft skills for when they will be married. This feature is common throughout all Sumatra island and to some extent through the entire nation. In fact, from a general perspective, women in Indonesia are not independent because they feel a sense of duty and would sacrifice themselves for the happiness and survival of their families. For this reason, in addition to the classic domestic work, in Karo community’s women are also labour force in the field. Furthermore, in the public sector because of an unequal access to knowledge and customs norms, men are more visible and have a main role in conducting ceremonials and in solving community’s issues. On the other hand, it is thanks to women that a clan has descendants and keep on existing and it is through the marriage and the act of giving the wife that alliances and bonds are formed among clans. The central role of women is also underlined by the custom for which men have to always sleep together with their wives if they live in a village, meaning that in case she is away for the night for any reasons the man is not supposed to sleep in their house, but has to spend the night in the *jambur*.

Economy

Taneh Karo derives its prosperity from two fundamental factors: the favourable location and the Dutch colonial ruling who diffused capitalism, wealth and agricultural enterprises. The fertility of the volcanic topsoil and the tropical climate, which prevents extreme seasonality, are optimal conditions for both European crops (potatoes, tomatoes, cabbage), used as cash crops mainly in Berastagi and Kaban jahé, and rice, vegetables, maize, cloves, red pepper, pulses and ground nuts for own consumption and market (C. Kushnick, 2006). The liberation from the Dutch colonizers brought a high number of Karo to migrate to the coast and to take possession of the former Europeans tobacco plantations outside the city of Medan which soon expanded and absorbed the plantations transforming the Karo farmers in city residents. Nowadays,

Karo living in urban areas are commonly small entrepreneurs or owners of shops or vehicles. The ones with a higher educational background cover professions such as lawyers, doctors and professors while there is a third group of young men who are not educated enough or do not have enough money to open their own business who are mainly bus drivers and guards in markets (Marbun, 2009). A limited amount of people conducts activities outside farming and livestock of chickens, goats, pigs and cattle (Slaat, Portier, 1992). The very little variety in terms of occupation within villages, the wealth brought by good harvests and the ancestral attachment to farming resulted in the constitution of a system of rights to protect the land which mirrors the Karo societal structure. If the land has been inherited from patrilineal ancestors, there is a sacred bond and the land cannot be sold, but needs to be managed by the male members of the group. While if the territory has been passed over by the *kalimbubu*, father to daughter or brother to sister, the woman can use the land throughout her entire life. It is socially unacceptable for the *kalimbubu* to request the land back once the woman dies, but it is possible threatening the *anakberu* of taking the land back as means for underlining their status, in case the wife receiver have been disrespectful (Slaat, Portier, 1992).

Religion

As already mentioned, Sumatra has been subjected to several cultural shocks. Animism was Karo original religion of spirits adoration, cosmology and ancestor worship initially called *Perbegu* later changed to *Agama Pemena* (Steadly, 1993). According to this old belief, everyone has a soul and when people die this *tendi* will turn into *begu* or death soul, spirit. Thanks to these profound connections with the earth spirits and their guardian, Karo had a deep understanding of and harmonious relationship with natural events. Nowadays Karo have mostly disconnected communications and rituals with the spirits and nature, transforming most of the sacred area around the mountain, composed by rivers and forest, into agricultural land. Collective religious activities and offering rituals recalling personal and supernatural events started to disappear with the transformation of political context and traditional and religious concepts (Marbun, 2009). In other words, slowly starting from 1820's when Islam first arrived in Batak areas and 1850's and 1860's, when Dutch brought Christianity, *Pemena* had lost its strong symbolic significance and is now just a fragment of what it used to be (Gale, 2005). This decline in animist practices became stronger with the agricultural development of the early 20th century which brought new technologies and divert Karo attention from the land and harvest spirits (Steadly, 1993).

The first Christian mission in Tanah Karo began only in 1889. The Karo population immediately saw the possibility to gain from the missionary's agenda in terms of education and resources, asking for basic non-food items as well as cash loans and legal advice (Steadly, 1996). Initially the missionaries and religion were connected to the despised Dutch government and to the hated plantations where Karo worked as slaves. This is one of the reasons why throughout the entire colonial period the conversions, both to Christianity and Islam, which instead was connected to the expansionist neighbour Malay or to Acehnese traders, were low and mainly forced. In fact, at that time converting for one or another religion would have led to changing one's political preference, traditions, customs and also language.

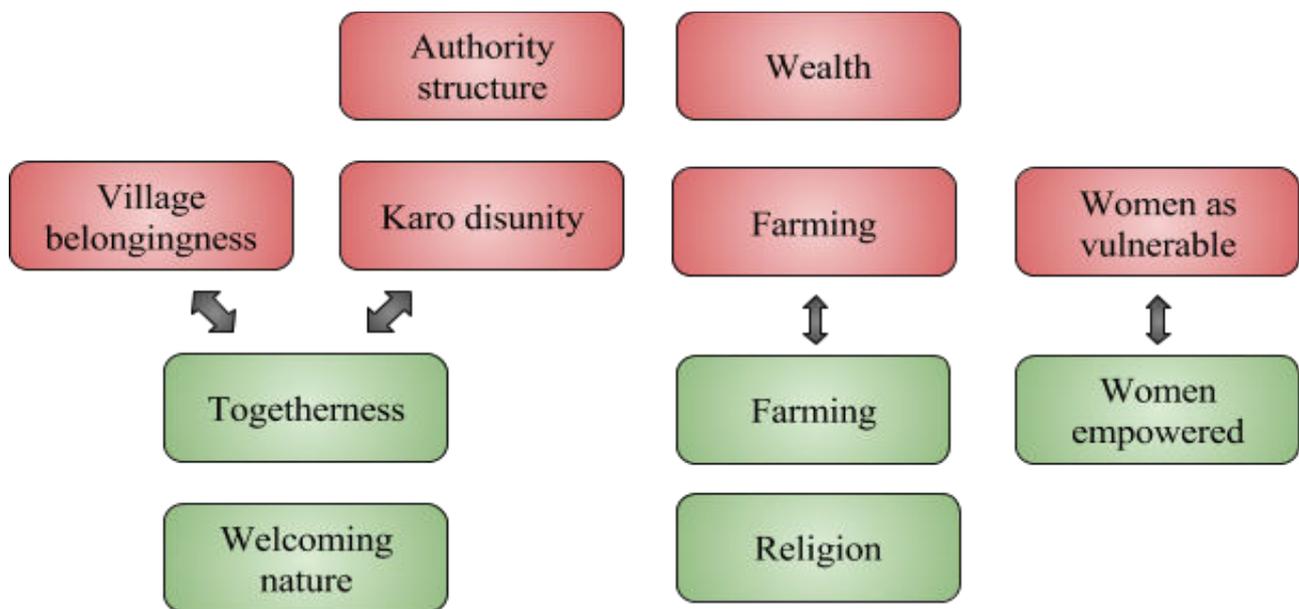
“Becoming a Muslim meant speaking the Malay language, following the customs of the Malays, dressing in the Malay style, and accepting the political sovereignty of the Malay sultans” (Steadly, 1996 p. 456).

The lack of a large community sustaining individual’s conversions was also a strong deterrent for Karo whose kinship relations are the very foundation of being alive. While Christianity was associated with a sense of loneliness and loss, Islam gave the opportunity to join another kind of identity from pagan to inclusive Muslim-Malay (Steadly, 1993). Despite this strong opposition towards the Christian mission some aspects could be transferred to the Karo Batak Protestant Church (GBKP) founded in 1941, at a time when only 3 percent of Karo were church members (Steadly, 1996). During the Japanese invasion, Muslim all over the country were increasingly supported and Christians were afraid of being interned because of their religious identification (Mujiburrahman, 2001). After independence, both the new religions became more appealing. In order to avoid an even larger consent for Islam, the Christian GBKP became the main supporter of the Karo culture and translated for the first time the bible into indigenous languages. With Sukarno government, the five principles of *Pancasila* became the leading ideology of a new Indonesian nation. First and foremost, the national identity is defined by the belief in one God and consequently by belonging to one of 5 monotheist religion Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism and extending the meaning of monotheism Hinduism and Buddhism (Steadly, 1993). The Indonesian government defined the local religions as backward practice comparable to a sect (S. Kipp, 1998), because they were lacking a holy text, a proper church -and also any sort of hierarchical organizations which the government could control. It was thanks to this new ideology that the GBKP could grow exponentially and that the connection between Christianity and the despised colonial power ended. The increase of observants of Christianity and Islam was also a consequence of the failed coup from the communist party in 1965. In fact, under Soeharto regime, people who were still practising original religions were considered *belum beragama* (do not yet have religion) and being atheist was a peculiarity of communists, thus Karo who had not yet converted to one of the five religions were suspected communists and consequently would have been at risk of persecution. Because Muslims were cooperating in the communist hunt and because they were largely supported by the government, many *belum beragama* converted to Christianity. Today GBKP is the largest organization in Karoland owning schools, clinics and orphanages, with a high number of wealthy, educated members who are government officials (Mujiburrahman, 2001). Nowadays Agama *Pemena* is marginally accepted because of its touristic interest, but it is considered under the umbrella of the department of education and culture as a belief (*kepercayaan*) or custom (*adat*).

4.3 Findings

Culture and resilience

This study attempts to analyse the influence that Karo culture has on Mt Sinabung survivors' resilience and to spot how the aid organizations on the field manage to integrate this specificity in their relief effort respecting the new global humanitarian guidelines of "context matters" and "people at the centre". Overall, it has been analysed how and if culture plays a role in the Karo community resilience. Figure 1 below visualizes the contrast among those cultural aspects supporting Karo resilience and those limiting their possibilities of starting anew.



As underlined in chapter two, it is hard to capture the diversity of human experience in a theoretical definition, as it is difficult to describe in definitive terms, negatively or positively, the features of Karo culture. The interviews showed that there are some factors that can be both helping and obstructing Karo future recovery. Their ancestral attachment to farming, as means not only of merely survival, but also of wealth, for starter, is hindering an open-minded attitude towards diversification of livelihood.

“They were farmer before, quite rich with many lands and they usually got a wage of about 6 million rupias minimum per month, but after continuous eruptions they could not use the land anymore...
 “Project coordinator, Ibu foundation

“...they were rich before and suddenly poor and they had to accept that and is quite difficult to adapt...” Project coordinator, Ibu foundation.

On the other side, because they are experienced in this activity and they strongly feel it is part of who they are, they welcome any interventions which is connected to it even if it is not purely farming such as food processing. Some of them are also willing to engage in business activities, being the availability of land scarce, as long as they are complementing them with farming.

“...A small portion of the community around Mt Sinabung has included cultivation of Arabica coffee, because it is not affected by the ash or heat. Also, onion because it is a root based vegetable, but the price for onions is not so good...” *Senior research fellow, RDI*

“Most of our beneficiaries are also ILO’s...we tried to coordinate so people involved with on-farm activities are involved also in the off-farm activities. Farmer who has been trained in creating the product by us then is trained by ILO in managing the product when entering the market, how to finance the product...” *Country office representative for Indonesia, FAO*

Another example of a double nature factor is their sense of togetherness. In fact, it is a strong glue and a reason to activate mutual assistance mechanisms, but only within villages and kinship. Groups which prefer a communal way of living than an individualistic one find sources of growth and success within the sense of togetherness. It is exactly the concept of Tuter Siwaluh, literally meaning brotherhood, that helped in certain moment the Karo villages which have been displaced or relocated in the newly formed Siosar. Karo have always shown a strong sense of self-help and mutual assistance in terms of kinship and their society organization which reflect clan affiliation.

“Karo consist of 5 clans which have interrelations with each other. Karo culture can be divided in three structures: the *kalimbubu*, *sibayak* and *anakberu*. Normally the lowest level serves the highest one and the second level become intermediate between the lowest and the highest...this is the organization, they can help each other through this...” *Senior research fellow, RDI*

“... some families have been supporting the people that are still in the evacuation camps, some stay with other families outside the villages. Resilience is there: extended family.” *Senior research fellow, RDI*

Whereas, it is because of tensions among communities of different villages, which feel so strongly their identity, that they are not willing to merge with others, preventing the success of the independent relocation approach.

“...I would say there is more togetherness from people in the same village even if from different clans compared with people from same clan, but different villages.” *Senior research fellow, RDI*

“They are really close to their family so based on our experience I have staff from local community that when assessing beneficiaries will make a priority for his relatives, but there are many people more qualified to participate at the trainings” *Local Project Coordinator, ILO*

“The three villages brought back their original social capital as also the cultural aspects, the *jambur*, the church, the mosque... the government allow three villages to become one big Siosar village. This also created tensions because they are from different villages” *Senior research fellow, RDI*

In addition, there are also elements which have been proved, from the conducted interviews and read reports, to be solely positive or negative. Karo have been clinging to religion either Christianity, Islam or animist practices, in order to feel a sense of calm and reassurance for the future.

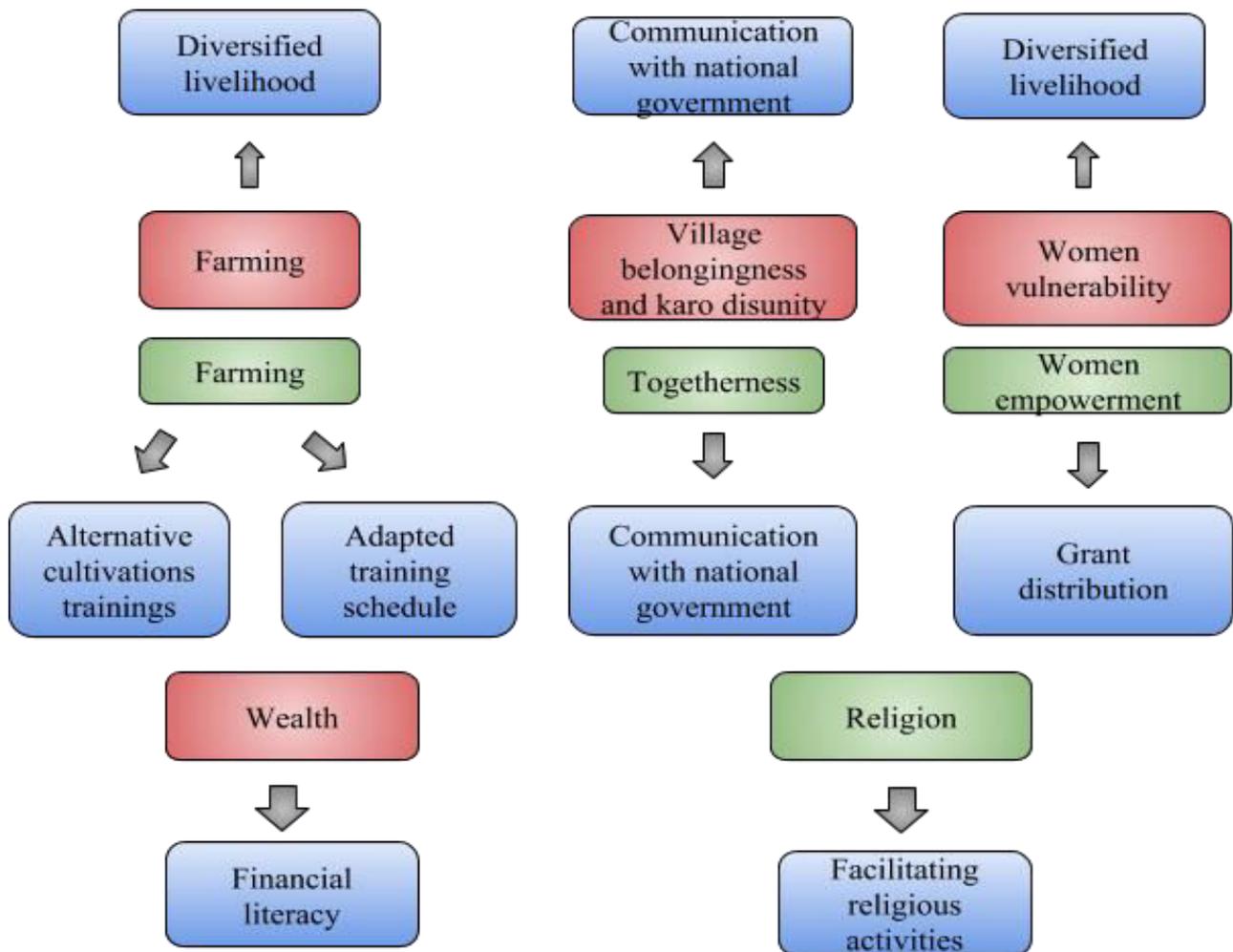
“After Sinabung erupted there was some kind of traditional ritual ceremony to request the mother earth not to hurt the Karonese people. They were praying and giving offering for instance, the head of goats or chickens...” *Senior research fellow, RDI*

On the contrary, because they are used to be wealthy landowner who gained large amount of money with a single harvesting, they find it difficult to see themselves as poor and tend to mismanage their money.

“After the government supported them directly with cash, influenced by probably lack of education in managing cash, many misused the money. Instead of long term planning for themselves they gamble. I cannot generalize for all people, but we can find that gambling is part of men’s life there.” *Senior research fellow, RDI*

Organizations’ intervention addressing Culture and resilience

Concerning humanitarian interventions, the findings show an overall inclusion of Karo specificity to the extent of the physical limitations of the case such as no fertile land availability, no willingness to drastically change livelihood and continuous eruptions. Figure 2 below summarizes the aid activities of the organizations interviewed and their linkages with the previously described cultural features.



For example, ILO, aware of the limited willingness of Karo population to drastically change their livelihood activities, tried to organize a trial business training involving few people to give an opportunity for integrating the income that farmer could gain, which was lower than before the eruptions.

“Unless there is professionalism and punctuality they will not be able to compete with the market. There are still no licenses or health tests, so it is not at the competitive level. It is good to promote this livelihood. It is not change, it is diversity of livelihood, in fact most of them are still doing farming...” *Senior research fellow, RDI fellow*

It also cooperated with FAO in conducting trainings in terms of managing a food processing business in order not to distance their activities too much from agriculture. Moreover, these business trainings, mainly food processing and sewing, were sensitive to the situation of some women who, for their role in society, are the only one taking care of their children and at the same time need to work. Thanks to the acquired skills they could gain money from home and simultaneously raise their kids. In parallel to ILO, FAO was proceeding with farming trainings which were giving Karo the opportunity, despite the scarcity of land, to cultivate ash and heat resistant crops. Still referencing to the ILO awareness of the context, it implemented

financial literacy trying to address the new condition of poverty in which the untrained Karo population did not know how to behave in terms of money managing.

“When we conducted training on finance, we thought it could be useful for them especially for the ones who often take loans from credit unions. They can now understand how to get a good loan from a bad loan” *Local Project Coordinator, ILO*

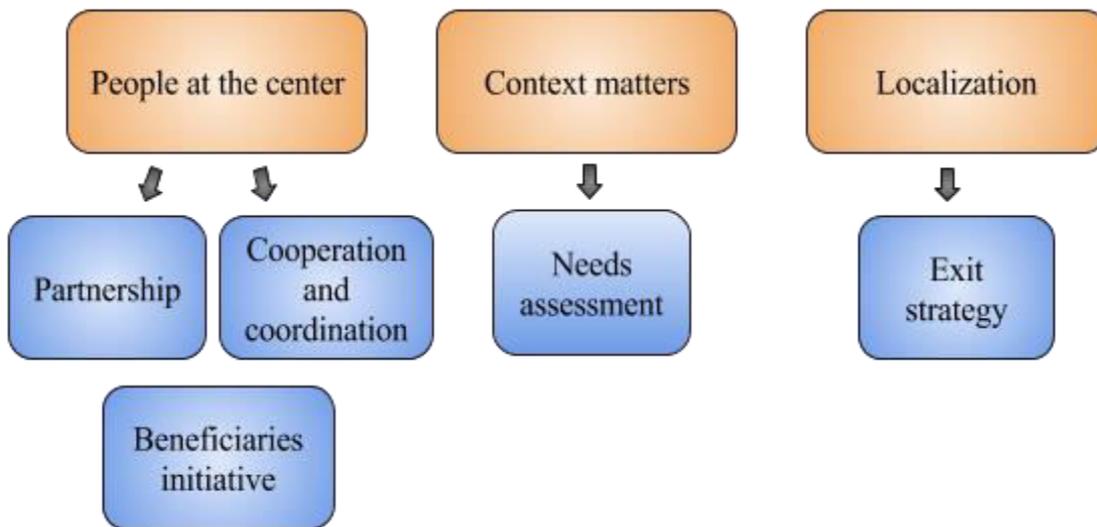
“Finance literacy is useful in the next steps, for reconstruction after being relocated. It is from outsider, but it is important...the financial management training is very useful especially for young families. There is a gap of knowledge held between the previous generation and the present. The older generation tends to be more efficient while the younger generation tends to be consumptive” *Senior research fellow, RDI*

UNDP instead, which had stronger contacts with the government than with the affected population, tried to communicate to the government the importance of taking into account Karo cultural background. For this reason, UNDP pushed for a greater understanding of the difficulties that Karo were facing in the cultural process of independent relocation and it suggested to the government to build in the Siosar relocation site all the facilities which were essential for a Karo village such as churches, mosques and *jambur*.

“The village is a group of family members which have different family names. So, to move from one village to another require some cultural process, they just cannot move one member or village to another village if there is not approval from community leader...there are cultural barriers that government needs to address. We (UNDP) need to give the government the background, how you can convince the community to receive the new members...” *Project and Programme Management Professional, UNDP*

Organizations’ intervention addressing the transformative humanitarian agenda

Finally figure 7 below represents how relief organizations interpreted into action to the three main transformative principles of “context matters”, “people at the centre” and “localization”.



According to the UN agencies mandate for which they have first and foremost to relate with the government, the direct contact and consequent influence on the affected community is missing. For this reason, in order to put people at the centre, they had to depend on local partners. Constituting arenas to discuss the duties and responsibilities of each stakeholder is another tool to involve locals and to rightly allocate the appropriate resources to effectively respond to the actual need. In Mt Sinabung, this aim has been achieved through consultative meetings which were participated also by civil society, local NGOs and local entrepreneurs and through the cluster system, in order to address in a more institutional way all the humanitarian relevant actors.

“...we (UNDP) need to alienate different initiatives by different entities, because the government is not capturing all the needs. So, we have to coordinate with other entities if they have the resources to fill out the gaps... it is one of the way we are trying to achieve the coordination output” *Project and Programme Management Professional, UNDP*

“They (OXFAM) built a network around Indonesia to be prepared when disasters come. This consortium has different kinds of characteristics and competences that can complete each other: empower local NGOs in order to always be involved in grassroots community and to get support from big INGOs, strengthen INGOs with the support of small NGOs to implement the projects. OXFAM founded the consortium to increase capacity building about community resilience and we learn best practices and lessons learned, it is at national level” *Executive director, PKPA*

However, the most direct way to address beneficiaries and to give them ownership of their resilience is through the facilitation and support of the initiatives coming from their ideas.

“They (government and villages) did not have a system of preparedness in place, they did not have mechanisms on how to evacuate when the big eruption will come, so some of them (beneficiaries) just decided to run it by themselves...” *Executive director, Pusaka Indonesia*

Simultaneously, in order to involve targeted people and to put them at the centre of discussion about activities, the context is analysed and accurate needs assessments are conceptualized in order not to waste any resources and to be culturally sensitive, thus shaping and tailoring the activities on the peculiar characteristics of the affected population. This is what FAO did when it decided to cover the gap of livelihood activities which were not considered by the Renaksi governmental plan or as Ibu foundation did when they planned psychosocial and psychological activities because of the high stress and discomfort felt by IDPs which came out from comprehensive needs assessments.

“...we (UNDP) asked the secretariat how INGOs and NGOs can support. The area of livelihood would have complemented what the government was doing. It is actually when FAO and ILO jumped in to support small business, activities of farmers, analysing and access to market...” *Project and Programme Management Professional, UNDP*

Finally, to guarantee the future sustainability of those cooperatively constructed projects, organizations need to secure a stable structure in order to leave the area as soon as possible, to avoid aid dependency and to build back better. In other words, they need to create an exit strategy ahead while planning for the projects. In the Mt Sinabung case every organization had its way to proceed: UNDP created a database for the government to recognize the possible areas at risk, ILO trained the government official, in order to make them consciously responsible of the continuation of the projects and again Ibu foundation transferred capacity to local partners and Karo volunteers to ultimately strengthen the whole community.

“We (Ibu foundation) had given the APePeBe capacity building: how to design program, how to give psychosocial support, how to ask for fund in the local area, how to improve advocacy. The knowledge, the capacity is already useful for APePeBe now they are more aware...” *Project coordinator, Ibu foundation*

“Now the beneficiaries became youth leaders in the area, thanks to the capacity building they received from us (Ibu foundation). Now they have strong voice to talk to their government” *Project coordinator, Ibu foundation*

5. Conclusion

Considering the population that is targeted at the centre of every activity means weighting with care both vulnerabilities and strengths coming from the very being of that community. For this reason, organizations need to be aware not only of the strengths derived from social capital, networking, local knowledge etc., but also and especially of the vulnerabilities that these centuries old traditions are cementing into the society reactions to shocks. Simultaneously, it is important to consider that some of those vulnerabilities can be addressed more easily than others because they are not touching the realm of core identity. In fact, in case they do, a cultural process involving behavioural change needs to be undertaken, thus extra sensitivity and time needed to be taken into account. The specific case of Karo proved once again that there is no ~~one~~-single approach to communities affected by hazards in terms of resilience and that there are aspects of culture that can either positively help this process or negatively hinder it or exert both functions at the same time. Nevertheless, even if a customs feature is an obstacle to successful recovery, it cannot simply be removed and change cannot be forced upon the community, but a campaign of awareness and education about the future consequences of these habits has to be conducted. The government and the aid machinery cannot ignore Karo's difficulties in merging different villages because of their sense of *Tutur* only within kinship, but they need to find a balance between the Karo willingness of helping each other as *kalimbubu* and *senina* and the obligations that a volcano erupting brings to them. A territory identity needs to be safeguarded as much as possible, but it is true that in case of altered conditions a certain degree of change needs to be implemented, as long as it is not subversive. In fact, a purely business oriented set of activities which aim at industrializing the rural Karo just because less land is available now is a one-way road to failure. Whereas, slightly shifting the Karo mindset towards the possibility of gaining money from a source which is somehow still connected to their habits (quails breeding, food processing and alternative crops cultivations) is a way to diversifying livelihood. There are instead cases in which a drastic change has proved to be successful as the women knitting activities. In that case, even if the traditions have not been respected, there has been a clever recognition of a social need for household led by women, thus there has been a sort of adaptation even of a core identity element which started from few women, but can lead to a greater help for many in the whole Karoland. Furthermore, this study proves once again that usually every society, when it has undergone a stressful event, is looking for the known and in rural society there is nothing more familiar than the own culture. Therefore, several needs assessments conducted by relief organizations showed the willingness for psychosocial and psychological support mainly in the form of restoring habits such as *jambur* communal gathering, communal farming, religious events. Here it is to say that Mt Sinabung is a peculiar case, because the volcano had not erupted for hundreds of years. This means that the indigenous knowledge in terms of dealing with hazards also in a creatively manner, which became quite a common concept in the literature concerning resilience and disaster management, had no value because non-existent. For this reason and the fact that there is not a conventional authority structure and that there is scepticism towards the local and national government, it has been challenging for organizations to precisely construct alternatives for Karo which involved their cultural habits. For example, as already mentioned, the hardest operation in which only

UNDP had some degree of involvement has been the independent relocation. Because the Karo do not trust in the government and do not have a strong voice within administrative structures, it is hard to work together for a different solution and tensions rise. The book “Cultures and disasters: understanding cultural framing in disaster risk reduction” (Krüger et al., 2015) states that it is the frequency of risk which eventually encourage cultural change emphasizing the idea that culture is a liquid concept in a dynamic state. It is because, as already said, the eruptions are a new event, even if by now it has been already seven years from the first one, that Karo have not showed radical cultural change, but it is probably a matter of time as this social world is in a constant process of adjustment. For the purpose of this paper, if culture is perceived as dynamic then also resilience is viewed in the words of UNDP as “a transformative process of strengthening the capacity of people” (Kindra, 2013) and reducing vulnerability. Therefore, if culture is taken into account, the organizations can see the disasters consequences in terms of socially driven. Consequently, the disaster is not addressed with a superficial solution that would be temporary and limited and would aim at merely hazard resistant communities rather than “communities able to anticipate, manage, recover and transform from shocks” (Kindra, 2013). In other words, resilience is a phenomenological process of adaptation towards difficulties of existence through both change, where is needed, and preservation, where is possible. The Karo community is walking towards this goal but, as anything which touches the realm of identity and culture, it will take time.

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