The Impact of the Risk Perception Society on Sovereignty, Security and Development in the Global South

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New Order

In 1972, at the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, the prospective head of what was to become the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), Maurice F. Strong, proposed a need for '*new concepts of sovereignty*' to tackle global ills. His call coincided with a growing premonition of problems that was beginning to emerge in the West, as also expressed by the influential report of the so-called Club of Rome, '*Limits to Growth*'.

This gloomy cultural mood and the ideas associated with it were, in their turn, undoubtedly shaped by various other factors impacting on Western nations at that time. These included, the ending of gold convertibility and the devaluation of the dollar in 1971 (driven by a faltering US economy combined with the expenditure needed to meet the demands of the Vietnam War), along with various episodes of civil unrest that, from May 1968 onwards, had gripped nations in Europe as well as further afield.

Together with a Cold War that – at the time – was heating up quite considerably, it is unsurprising that a number of thinkers in the West felt a sense of doom and started advocating new ways of organising domestic and international affairs. However these thinkers were then still a minority of the nervous, educated elite and their unease, and the

proposals for change they proposed were kept in check by the material and ideological threat still posed by the Soviet Union.

The Cold War provided a degree of moral purpose and direction to the West. The period witnessed substantial sums of capital directed to and invested in the Global South as part of concerted campaigns to show that the market system worked. This also served to support various authoritarian leaders and military juntas in these regions. But as the Cold War drew to a close so too did Western interest in those regimes. And the associated drive for development both beyond and within its own borders also faltered.

In the early 1990s, in the West, it was as if the floodgates had been opened to the opportunity of reconceptualising society along new lines, which had lain dormant for twenty years or more. The end of the Cold War was portrayed as a period of opportunity for the West, but the demise of old enemies and ideologies combined with the inability to shape and promote an alternative vision led instead to speculation over a plethora of new threats. Risk management emerged as a new organising framework for a period lacking clear direction.

The central referent of security, which had until then been understood as the nation state was – like everything else – also brought into question. Nations, it was argued, had exposed their citizens to great insecurities through war, economic turmoil and environmental damage. Accordingly, attention shifted more and more to what came to be known as human security, combined with a perceived need to address matters at the individual – rather than state – level.

It is in this context that we ought to understand the initial euphoria which led to early successes of initiatives such as the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro, which came to be known as the first Earth Summit. The relative decline in approval of the nation state led to more attention being paid to, and vested in, supranational institutions – such as the UN and EU – as well as subnational bodies – such as civil society groups and non-governmental organisations. But whilst all of these seem popular in certain quarters and some have considerable competency in specific areas, their legitimacy and authority remain open to question.

Before the start of the new millennium therefore, the new institutional configuration emerging in the West was shifting away from the Cold War divisions of Left versus Right, towards more apolitical forms of organisation. This was expressed by vocal but unrepresentative activists, as well as by increasingly managerial, process-oriented parties, who – lacking the comprehensive visions of old – often suffered from a heightened (and even exaggerated) sense of insecurity. This became manifest in campaigns primarily centred around issues of identity, corruptibility, vulnerability and sustainability.

If not already present in the Global South these outlooks and priorities were soon exported to its shores by a nervous West that no longer sought to colonise territory but rather (and less consciously) minds and attitudes through the prism of its own dire assessments and pessimistic projections. At the same time the crisis of authority and accountability became worse as these approaches failed to engage, let alone inspire, the people they purported to represent.

Apocalypse Now

Human security and non-state actors may have come of age, but this has not been without its drawbacks. In recent years, maybe with a view to highlighting their causes, a tendency appears to have developed among many professionals associated with these milieus to use apocalyptic language to describe almost any problem. By doing so they transform specific challenges pertaining to development, health and the environment into supposedly more significant security-related concerns in pursuit of attention and resources for their respective agendas.

Viewed through the now fashionable prism of risk management, the world, it would seem, is steadily getting worse. And the source – as well as the victim – of these problems is held to be abundantly clear: namely humanity itself. That is why development, which is still urgently needed across vast swathes of the Global South, is now viewed with considerable ambivalence by influential commentators and actors in the West – for the instabilities it may unleash (as well as its potential for competition and corruption).

Brazil may be less unpopular than China, it may be a country people like to like and it may be helping to address two of the main security concerns of the world today – pertaining to food and energy production. However, how it goes about resolving these concerns will be scrutinised increasingly by external actors, leading to new and unexpected pressures internally. For example, genetically modified organisms (GMOs) have been a cause of concern in the West and even supposedly clean hydroelectric power can be presented as a problem if it means large scale construction in a romanticised rainforest.

In the popular parlance of activists and governments (the latter seeking to regain some support and legitimacy by adopting the outlook of the former), catastrophe and conflict abound. Repeated reference is made to the possibility of epidemic and extinction. We are constantly reminded of human insecurities and vulnerabilities. Little wonder then that, from the outset of the outbreak of H1N1 influenza in 2009, Margaret Chan, Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), declared: "*it really is all of humanity that is under threat*".

When humanity was not wiped out, the WHO declared it a victory for its new warning system, and when the price of this victory was called into question by governments, dismayed at having spent so much preparing for a non-event, the WHO sought to blame others for the hysteria, as well as advising that commenting in hindsight was always easy. But the WHO is just one example of many pertaining to our new risk perception society in which every challenge is problematized.

Chan's phrase above could be applied by anyone to almost anything. Similar utterances have been made in relation to international terrorism and climate change. It could relate to other pandemic fears like Ebola, or health issues such as cancer and obesity. Some campaigners have used this language to warn of the impact of both existing and new technologies, such as nuclear power or nanotechnology, as well as in regard to natural events such

as earthquakes and floods. But by becoming so profligate the words begin to lose their potency and meaning. Worse, they end up as self-fulfilling prophecies – since preparing for worst-case scenarios requires reorganising the world as if these were already real.

Part of the problem, it is asserted, is that we now live in a '*risk society*', shaped by uncertainty, unknowns and even '*unknown unknowns*'. But when was human existence ever assured or fully understood? What seems more to the point is that we live in a '*risk perception society*', whereby our assessment of challenges is shaped by a contemporary social mood that emphasises negative presumptions and dystopian fantasies, as well as understating our existing knowledge and collective ability to resolve the challenges we confront.

In fact, how societies define and respond to a challenge or crisis is only partly dependent on their scale or the agent causing them. Historically evolving cultural attitudes and outlooks have been shown to play a far greater role. These social elements explain why it is that, at certain times and in specific circumstances, a calamity can fail to be a point of discussion, but in other situations relatively minor events may become key reference points.

Emergencies are acted upon differently according to what they represent to particular societies, irrespective of objective indicators, such as total cost or lives lost. The inability to make sense of threats, attribute meaning or draw positive conclusions from their existence can be quite disarming. It can determine whether our focus is on resourcefulness, reconstruction and the future, or vulnerability, blame and the past. Our responses, therefore, often teach us more about ourselves, than about the problems that trigger them.

In turn, public perceptions of risk are – to a significant degree – shaped by the pronouncements and interpretations of elites and experts. Assumptions and allegiances develop over protracted periods of time, long before particular problems manifest themselves. Thus, the manner in which an incident or development is framed can determine its outcome. For instance, an absence of trust in the authorities – or in other human beings – will impact on the response to an emergency, irrespective of its specific contours.

Developing South

The implications of the changes described above for developing countries is that these nations are – to an unprecedented extent – buffeted by social and cultural currents that have emerged beyond their borders in a similar, but possibly more insidious, way to the external political and economic forces that shaped them in previous centuries. Under such circumstances independence can easily become an illusion for those who fail to notice and understand these forces, especially if they lack a clear vision or the confidence to assert their own direction and interests for the period ahead.

It is a moot point to ask whether the Global South is any better served by the confused and uncertain actors in the West today – who react nervously to world events and view everything through the prism of risk – as opposed to by the overly-confident and assertive powers of old. Whilst anti-communism was a motive for Western intervention

across the world in the latter half of the twentieth century the key drivers today are less transparently political – or even conscious.

Capital still determines economic and business matters. In a post-political world it increasingly provides potential for abuse and corruption through the pursuit of government largesse in its issuing of contracts, permits and licences. But while the market may focus on adding value, it has little to say about values themselves – in the moral sense. The old political Right may have won the economic wars, but the old Left continues to wage the cultural ones. There is, of course, more to life than mere economic existence, but the social fears promoted by contemporary critics have an unfortunate tendency to narrow the terrain of human potential still further to survival itself.

The problem is that all sides promote an interventionist state model in which the population is projected as a mass of vulnerable victims in need of protection, as opposed to viewing people as rational agents shaping their own destinies. This outlook provides hesitant and isolated elites with a regulatory agenda (irrespective of their political views), and a new, if limited, sense of moral purpose. By emphasising process management through expert knowledge it disenfranchises people from the possibility of solving their own problems, while offering the confused authorities clear actions to engage in – preparedness, surveillance and vigilance – that project their internal confusions as external threats.

It is important to understand these trends as not being driven by cynicism, dishonesty or hypocrisy in the West, but rather by confusion. When viewed through a calamitous mind-set, the benefits of development do not clearly outweigh the supposed risks. Accordingly, advocates for restraint are found in all arenas today, possibly none more evident than those relating to large infrastructure projects. In this manner, China is projected as a problem for the West – not through the use of old-fashioned racially prejudiced ideology – but simply because development is problematized in and of itself.

To take just one example, by 2006 supposed environmental concerns – promoted by activists but accepted and acted upon by governments – had stopped more than 200 hydroelectric projects globally. Many other projects have been delayed or significantly scaled-down following this pattern: the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River in China; the Ilisu Dam on the River Tigris in Turkey; the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada River in India; and the Belo Monte Dam on the Xingu River in Brazil. This has also affected countless smaller projects globally and led to the dismantling of existing dams, not just in the developing world but in developed countries such as the United States.

No doubt corruption does exist, short-cuts are taken and socio-environmental damage will be caused – but these challenges are not insurmountable as campaigners insist. High-profile support from urban intellectuals such as the writer Vandana Shiva in India and the filmmaker James Cameron in Brazil has tended to a romanticisation of the way-of-life of indigenous people and, while compensatory measures are demanded, the real consequences are ignored. So, in India the establishment of the Shoolpaneshwar Wildlife

Sanctuary in Gujarat – an area almost six-times as great as that to be flooded – has effectively imprisoned inhabitants by outlawing modern farming and development. In Brazil, while apparently defending the Kayapo people, activists have been shown to exaggerate adverse impacts of development while understating any benefits.

Similar arguments were wielded in opposition to the Interoceanic Highway that now stretches across Latin America connecting the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, thereby opening up potential for a vast increase in trade. The $1b project that would facilitate regional integration and allow the countries concerned to become serious global players was presented by some in the West in pessimistic terms – focussing solely on the potential for crime that might ensue, as well as environmental damage. This was a far cry from the euphoria that greeted the completion of the first transcontinental railway across America in 1869, which was seen as a triumph and as a symbol of the American Dream.

Domain Expansion

It is not just dams and other major infrastructure projects that suffer from a demand of excessive justification in the current climate – both science and society are being reorganised through the stultifying focus on the need to act in a supposedly precautionary manner in all circumstances. But, by doing so, the West reveals its own inner insecurities as the real driving force behind such concerns. For the Global South, the solution to this will come – not by lambasting environmentalism as some kind of renewed foreign domination – but rather by highlighting the benefits of development for all globally, thereby promoting a human agenda with more engaged people.

A narrative has been allowed to emerge that – far from promoting much-needed economic growth and infrastructure improvements – proposes that the very opposite be applied – human restraint and humility in the face of supposedly unquestionable natural imperatives. Many even propose a simplistic link between development and adverse weather events or geological incidents. But our greater awareness of such occurrences, as well as the larger numbers affected and greater reparation costs, should be understood as a sign of human success rather than failure, as there are now more people with more to lose than ever before.

According to the American academic, Joel Best, "[o]nce a problem gains widespread recognition and acceptance, there is a tendency to piggyback new claims on to the old name, to expand the problem's domain". A recent example of this has been the tendency by environmentalist groups to promote their long-standing opposition to nuclear energy through reference to fears about terrorist attacks or earthquakes in the aftermath of 9/11 and the Fukushima power plant incident in Japan. But it is not just environmental interest groups making use of such tactics. Politicians, officials, businesses and the media – as well as varied NGOs and other civil society groups – have all become increasingly adept at posing the issues they wish to see addressed and prioritised in this manner.

The profligate use of the term 'pandemic' in the early phase of the worldwide H1N1 outbreak also illustrated this catastrophising trend. Many using the term did not appear to understand – or care – that such terminology applied to the geographical spread, rather than the rate of incidence – let alone severity – of the virus. Others do not seem to appreciate the real meaning of the word 'toxic', which relates to all substances (including water), or how what is deemed to be a 'resource' depends rather more on human resourcefulness than any supposedly natural limits.

Writing in the revised edition of his 1997 book 'Culture of Fear', the UK-based sociologist, Frank Furedi, noted how reference to the phrase "at risk" had increased almost ten-fold in British broadsheet newspapers over the six-year period covering the end of the 1990s. This cultivation of the language of vulnerability is unlikely to resolve things. Instead, by presenting human-beings as being both the cause and victims of powerful forces beyond our control, it may help breed a climate of apathy and disengagement.

The end of the Cold War proved to be very destabilising for Western elites. Some looked for new threats to focus upon, from the 'war on drugs' to the 'war on terror' and even a supposed 'war on obesity'. Others hoped that the period would usher in a new focus on humanitarian assistance. The problem with all of these however, was that they were largely driven by a search for purpose and meaning within the West, rather than by any actual attempt to address the demand for solutions and development elsewhere. At the time the French cultural theorist, Jean Baudrillard, sought to distinguish between two concepts:

"This is the difference between humanitarianism and humanism. The latter was a system of strong values, related to the concept of humankind, with its philosophy and its morals, and characteristic of a history in the making. Humanitarianism, on the other hand, is a system of weak values, linked to salvaging a threatened human species, and characteristic of an unravelling history".

Another way of expressing this is to distinguish between solutions that are done for people, as opposed to those that are done by people. Outside intervention – no matter what its aims – comes associated with all manner of presumptions and prejudices that rarely relate to the specifics of particular situations. With regard to the Global South, this is as true for the external intrusions they are often faced with as it is for the relationship between their governments and increasingly regulated citizens internally.

For instance, the dominant narrative on climate change is one that urges restraint in development and emphasises human culpability in creating the problem. But what the poor need most may well be further growth and a heightened sense of their own agency in resolving things. Similarly, ordinary people are the real 'first-responders' in any emergency. Disasters – whilst destroying physical and economic capital – also present a tremendous opportunity for the creation and enhancement of social capital – provided the spontaneous human need to exert and assume control is not subsumed to the agendas and presumptions of existing or external authorities. Sadly, despite the

variety of ways in which it is possible to interpret and respond to different challenges, the emphasis today seems to be on gloomy, apocalyptic visions.

None of the preceding points are to suggest that there are no problems to be resolved in the world. However, the presentation of humanity as the simultaneous cause and vulnerable victim of all problems is unlikely to help. The history of human responses to disaster – from environmental disasters to terrorist attacks – is actually quite heartening. People tend to be at their most cooperative and focused at such times. There are few instances of mass panic. Amidst the tales of devastation and woe from recent episodes, numerous individual and collective acts of bravery and sacrifice stand out, reminding us of the ordinary courage and conviction that are part of the human condition.

People often come together in an emergency in new and unexpected ways, using the experience to re-affirm social bonds and their collective humanity. Research reveals communities that were considered to be better off through having had to cope with adversity or crisis. Rather than being psychologically scarred, it appears equally possible to be enhanced and strengthened.

What may be needed most from all agencies at such times then – in addition to physical aid and support – is a degree of moderation and circumspection in attempting to impose their interpretation of events onto each situation and thereby seeking to steer future courses of action. An appropriate sense of proportionality and balance could do with being applied in such circumstances, as well as the avoidance of apocalyptic language. History shows that it is simply not the case that things are continuously getting worse or that technological arrogance is driving us all to the brink of disaster.

Indeed, far from human agency being the problem, it is rather its in-agency that has become manifest in recent years – as evidenced by the governmental dithering and simultaneous popular inaction at the time of hurricane Katrina in America. The tendency to associate an increasing number of phenomena – from climate change and energy supplies to population growth and the provision of food – with security, further confuses matters and is likely to yield significant problems. Far from holding back, it is time to move forwards.

Despite good intentions, humanitarianism has increasingly been reduced to interventionism, and all sense of humanity as both a progressive and vital force in our lives has been eviscerated with it. It is high time we celebrated the human in humanitarianism and relegated those who would portray us as both the cause – and vulnerable victims – of our own hubris to the dustbin of history where they belong.