Introduction to Calling for Change in Disaster Studies - Rethinking Disaster Studies

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This special issue calls for a change in disaster studies. This edition directly responds to the call for epistemological shifts from the imperative of the "Power, Prestige & Forgotten Values: A Disaster Studies Manifesto" that we endorsed together with 575 scholars from 63 countries since 2019.

The rise of knowledge production, indicated by the worldwide increase in peer-reviewed journals and grey literature in disaster studies over the last few decades, corresponds to the rise of risks and disasters. While this is a good sign of progress, it is also time to ask whose voice gets heard and who is left behind while producing 'authentic knowledge' and theory in disaster studies and who benefits from it. One can further ask a critical question: if the faces of global disaster victims are people of the Global South, why have the faces of the disaster scholars remained predominantly Western?

Scholars have observed the hegemony of Western scholarship in the production of disaster risk reduction, disaster prevention and management knowledge and solutions. We are mindful that what is labelled a Western scientific paradigm is not a monolithic entity and not necessarily a universal objective. Nevertheless, the Western scientific paradigm is a legacy that endorses power asymmetrically in the modern knowledge production system and sustains western hegemony in disaster science. Without critical reflection of such legacy, we risk creating knowledge that has no substance in the real world. We also risk losing the opportunity to uphold equality and empowerment and limit our communication and dialogues (Gaillard, 2019).

Global disaster and risk scholarship lack representation from most of the 'at-risk' and 'disaster hotspots' and most vulnerable places, including low and medium-income countries. Khan and the team (2021) observed a lack of pluralism and inclusion in epistemology, limiting the pursuit to obtain the whole truth in the production of knowledge in research studies (Gaillard, 2021)

Failure to decolonise disaster knowledge can only lead to vulnerabilities. This special issue promotes knowledge plurality by valuing local ontologies and epistemologies, whenever appropriate, to decolonise disaster studies and move beyond the "well" established western scientific approaches, sources, concepts, methodologies, values, and languages that are predominantly outsiders to the disaster and risk hotspots.

Epistemological shifts are the point of departure from long-overdue decolonisation projects in disaster studies. Epistemological shifts must start somewhere. In this edition, we processed eleven articles that deal with various issues that respect the Disaster Studies Manifesto's ambition to create an alternative future where epistemological pluralism and inclusivity, allowing local epistemologies and indigenous accounts of disasters and risks to have adequate space in disaster studies.

Maheen Khan and colleagues in their article, "Epistemological freedom: activating co-learning and co-production to decolonise knowledge production" argue that decolonisation projects in disaster studies should be deliberate efforts in the pursuit of truth and knowledge, which recognises the plurality and/or diversity of knowledge bases across the world, with an emphasis on knowledge rooted in grassroots communities, that is effectively integrated into both the acquisition and production of knowledge. The authors pointed out the limitations of the

traditional knowledge production system embedded in disaster and climate change research studies, showing that knowledge production in research processes conforms to colonialist thinking or west-inspired approaches. The current knowledge system often omits crucial information due to a lack of participation, inclusion, and diversity in knowledge production. The authors emphasised the need to integrate local knowledge from grassroots women-led initiatives in instances where disasters and crises are being investigated in vulnerable communities, especially in the Global South. They proposed decolonising knowledge production through activating co-learning and co-production. This requires iterative and collaborative processes involving diverse expertise, knowledge and actors to produce context-specific knowledge (Norstrom, 2020).

The article "Local Perspectives on Landslide Prevention and Management in Kalimpong District, West Bengal, India" is an excellent example of co-production. Lochan Gurung and Peter McGowran highlight the benefits of including the voice and perspectives of local research assistant (RA), who belongs to the same community and has been impacted by disasters "to make the research more responsive to, and reflective of, the problems people affected by landslides in Kalimpong face". The authors argue that 'where external researchers are leading the research – involving local RAs in the research design, fieldwork and research outputs is one way of doing research differently so that local voices and expertise are heard". They state that including the voice of the local RA is important for a holistic understanding of the problem.

Decolonising knowledge production requires concepts, epistemologies and methods, and theories to shed light on the situations of oppression related to capitalism, patriarchy, masculine domination, gender discrimination, colonialism, and racism. Feminist perspectives are often absent or silenced in disaster science and disaster risk reduction and management (Yadav et. al., 2021).

Shazana Andradi in the article "*Decolonising Knowledge Production in Disaster Management: A Feminist Perspective*" explores how the dominance of western perspective in disaster management which lacks local and feminist perspectives have translated into policy failure. She argues although there is an increasing recognition of women's agency in theory, in practice we still see women as vulnerable victims, silencing their agency and contributions to disaster management. She argues that if women are given the chance and if their perspectives are included in disaster management, many "hazards may not turn into disasters".

Sizwile Khoza, in the article "Gender mainstreaming in risk reduction and resilience-building strategies: local conceptualisation of gender and masculinities in Malawi and Zambia" explores how the western framing of gender and masculinities have had negative impacts at the local level, especially in the exclusion and subordination of men which also had impact on the participation of women at the local development initiatives. This article argues that instead of seeing men as an obstacle for gender mainstreaming, we must engage with positive masculinities. Positive masculinity is described as the act of non-violence, care, interdependence, partnership and cooperation. This article argues that positive masculinities could contribute to gender transformation and may increase men's involvement in gender mainstreaming.

In the article "*Disaster racism: using Black sociology, critical race theory and history to understand racial disparity to disaster in the United States*", Kyle Breen provides a call to action for disaster researchers that focuses on understanding differential disaster impacts. The author stated that social vulnerability approaches are insufficient to dismantle oppressive

systems and institutions. Using critical race theory (CRT) and Black Sociology, theoretical and disciplinary frameworks that centre Black people and non-Black people of colour (NBPOC), the article calls for the "disaster racism" approach to dismantling systemic racism and other oppressive systems, as well as to promote an anti-racist research agenda in the discipline of sociology of disaster. The author demonstrated two historical applications that put forth evidence of oppressive systems in the USA that can be examined using a "disaster racism" theoretical perspective.

In "*Interruptions: imagining an analytical otherwise for disaster studies in Latin America*", Manuel Tironi and co-authors discussed how four key concepts in disaster studies—agency, local scale, memory and vulnerability— were interrupted in their research conducted in the last four years in Chile. The authors proposed the intriguing question in the introduction: "*What does it mean to do disaster studies from and for the South?*". Authors responded to this question and provided definition of the concepts, problematizing them based on evidence collected in their field research. The findings suggest that agency, local scale, memory and vulnerability, as fundamental concepts for disaster risk reduction (DRR) theory and practice, need to allow for ambivalences, ironies, granularization and further materializations. The authors identify these characteristics as the conditions that emerge when doing disaster research from within the disaster itself, perhaps the critical condition of what is usually known as the South. In the end of the paper, in the conclusion section, they also made an interesting reflection that is interlinked with the Disaster Studies Manifesto.

Susie Goodall and the collaborators, in their paper "Exploring disaster ontologies from Chinese and Western perspectives: commonalities and nuances", focused on Chinese disaster studies with the goal of a foundational concept of "harmonious human-environment relationship". They argued that there is a hierarchical and ontological distinction between humans and the natural ecological system viewed as an integrated whole, with underlying rules that can be discovered by modern scientific research to enable the management of a harmonious relationship. The authors suggest a practical way, to begin with, the following questions: *What is the societal goal/aim? What is nature? What is society? How do these interact to create disasters? And what are the implications for DRR research and practice?*

Eija Meriläinen et. al. focused on "Examining relational social ontologies of disaster resilience: lived experiences from India, Indonesia, Nepal, Chile and Andean territories". They do not try to bring out a single "truth". The authors argue that firstly, the vignettes provide non-Western conceptualisations of resilience and attempt to provincialise externally imposed notions of resilience. Secondly, they draw attention to a social ontology of resilience as the examples underscore the intersubjectivity of disaster experiences, the relational reaching out to communities and significant other.

Western notions of resilience, as well as the phases of the disaster cycle (Bosher *et al*., 2021), need to be questioned. In the article "Reconceptualizing disaster phases through a metis based approach", Joanne Pérodin, Zelalem Adefris, Mayra Cruz, Nahomi Matos Rondon, Leonie Hermantin, Guadalupe De la Cruz, Nazife Emel Ganapati and Sukumar Ganapati calls for a change in disaster research through a *metis*-based approach which refers to practical skills and acquired intelligence in responding to a constantly changing environment. Their paper is based on *metis* from Miami-Dade County that is prone to an array of climate-related disasters. They find that there is a need to reconceptualize disaster phases in disaster research. For many members of marginalized communities of color, preparedness and mitigation are luxuries and

response becomes a time of worry about financial obligations and survival after the disaster. The paper underlines the importance of *metis*, a less studied and understood concept in disaster risk reduction, prevention and management literature and it questions disaster researchers' technical knowledge with respect to each of the four disaster phases in light of *metis*.

Two articles focused on ethics. Rodrigo Mena and Dorothea Hilhorst examined how to translate ethical considerations of disaster research in conflict-affected settings and how to be an adaptive space for continuous reflection in order to advance the field based on equitable collaboration, participatory methodologies, safety and security for all involved and responsible and inclusive research communication and uptakes.

In the article "Expanding the Transdisciplinary Conversation Towards Pluriversal Distributive Disaster Recovery: Development Ethics and Interculturality", Johannes M. Waldmüller explores disaster ethics from a Latin American decolonial and transdisciplinary perspective through an interdisciplinary and intercultural lens. Waldmüller emphasises the need to focus on disaster recovery as a relevant distributive phase for improving future prevention and mitigation, while remedying long-standing injustces. He presents a theoretical perspective on decolonial studies, development ethics, intercultural practice and philosophy, and disaster ethics beyond utilitarian approaches. Waldmüller finds that development and disaster ethics remain worlds apart. Utilitarian ethics in emergency response, in addition to their problematic universalization, have prevented further engagement with deontological and process-based principles, including a nuanced distributive sensitivity. He calls for distributive bottom-up engagement beyond professional and academic boundaries. As such he presents a new direction for decolonising disaster ethics, so far unexplored, seeking to bridge the value gap between development and disaster efforts, planning and prevention.

This special issue is part of a collective effort to decolonize disaster studies, joining with other special issue of *Revista de Estudios Latinoamericanos sobre Reducción del Riesgo de Desastres* (Latin American Journal on Disaster Risk Reduction) that promoted the Disaster Studies Manifesto, published 14 articles in spanish (Rodas et al., 2022; Marchezini et al., 2021) and promoted a workshop with 72 people in October 2021 during the second edition of online seminar "*Desnaturalização dos desastres e mobilização comunitária*" (Denaturalization of disasters and community mobilisation). The Disaster Studies Manifesto was published in ten languages and we - in partnership with the collective of this Manifesto and people interested in joining this movement - hope to identify other ongoing initiatives in those languages, as well as to promote mechanisms to make them visible.

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