DISASTER STUDIES – PERSPECTIVES BETWEEN NATURE AND RITUAL

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1. Introduction[2]

Though people, governments and individuals have since time immemorial been engaged in preventing and coping with disasters, the academic field of disaster studies and disaster management as a systematic and explicit endeavor is of relatively recent origin. It started in the period after World War II and has since then been expanding in terms of size, academic development, and disciplinary and geographical focus.

This chapter will provide an overview of some major developments and issues in the field of disaster studies. It follows the journey of that field over the last half century. After a preliminary section on definitional issues, it will outline some major perspectives that can be distinguished in the field and that we consider significant. Though these have emerged in a somewhat chronological order, it has not been a linear development in the sense that they have replaced each other subsequently. The different perspectives can rather be recognized as different 'traditions' or 'styles' in the discipline of disaster studies. After a focus on the hazards of disasters, vulnerability, capacity and resilience, we identify the current focus on disaster governance. In our concluding section we argue to put disaster back into context by paying attention to four aspects: the long time disaster is in the making; the existence of

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[2] This article is partly a compilation of the authors' previous work on disasters and disaster management, and humanitarian aid. The chapter was written with support of the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), as part of the VICI scheme project no. 453/14/013.

disaster subcultures; the social constructed nature of disaster, and the everyday, 'real' practice of disaster response and governance.

As a preliminary remark we want to state that much of the literature in the field of disaster studies found its origin in real-life experiences with what was perhaps erroneously called 'natural disaster', though it was often realized that these 'natural disasters' were often (co)created by human behavior.[3] Much of what follows was inspired by the literature and our own work on 'natural disaster', but several of the perspectives dealt with below can equally be used for other categories of disaster as well, including industrial accidents or disasters resulting from conflict and war.

2. The nature and size of disasters

Disasters can be recognized more easily than they can be defined. In a 1997 review of definitions, Al-Madhari and Keller already enumerated twenty-seven different definitions of disaster.[4] Their list could easily be expanded by dozens of others that have appeared since then. This variety of definitions emphasizes different aspects of disaster, taking as a point of departure technical, geographical, sociological, psychological, medical, economic, developmental or administrative angles or combinations of those.[5] The criteria to establish when a situation has reached disaster level also varies. Some argue that a situation is disastrous when the local capacity to deal with it falls short and external assistance is needed to cope with it. A more formal and institutional criterion requires that the authorities must have declared an emergency, while another takes the number of casualties or damage as a point of departure. It is hardly fruitful to look at the 'only and true' definition in view of the definitional diversity and contingent nature of disaster. As the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) articulated already a quarter of a century ago, "An emergency cannot be defined as an absolute set of conditions".[6]

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[3] See also the Introduction to this book, p. XX.

[4] A.F. AL-MADHARI & A.Z. KELLER: 'Review of Disaster Definitions', in *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine* 12/1 (March 1997), 17-21.

[5] For some examples, see G. FRERKS, D. HILHORST & A. MOREYRA: *Natural Disasters. A framework for analysis and action, Report for MSF-Holland* (Wageningen 1999).

[6] INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT SOCIETIES: *World Disasters Report 1996* (Geneva 1996) 39.

We propose to identify some key elements that are usually present in disaster definitions. We can therefore say that a disaster is:

- An extreme phenomenon;
- Of great intensity and varying endurance (some 'sudden impact', others 'creeping');
- Occurring at a certain location or sometimes more wide-spread, affecting whole regions or countries;
- Involving a complex interplay between physical and human systems;
- Causing loss of life and threats to public health as well as physical damage and disruption of livelihood systems and society at large;
- Outstripping local capacities and resources;
- Requiring outside assistance to cope with.

This list is sufficient as a first orientation, though a more detailed and nuanced discussion is possible about all of these elements.

Disasters affect millions of people every year. In many parts of the world, disaster has rendered daily life in a protracted or even (semi-)permanent crisis exacerbated by political and institutional fragility. Disasters affect livelihoods and agricultural production – already weakened by demographic pressures, climate change, ecological deterioration, economic decline and conflict – and can contribute to factors that undermine societal stability and peace.

The number of people affected and the damage caused by a disaster do of course fluctuate over the years. The World Disasters Report based on the EM-DAT (Emergency Events Database) of Louvain University reports that in the period 2008-2017 3751 disasters were reported, affecting over two billion people and causing a damage of US$ 1,658 billion.[7] Over eighteen million people were displaced by disaster.[8] The majority of these disasters are weather-related (especially floods) and hence may be sensitive to the effects of climate change. 40% of the total number of disasters occur in Asia and more generally in lower-middle income countries.[9]

[7] International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies: *World Disasters Report 2018. Leaving no one behind* (Geneva 2018) 168.
[8] International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies: *World Disasters Report 2018* 182-183.
[9] International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies: *World Disasters Report 2018* 177, 179.

Whereas disasters were in the past viewed as extraordinary events deviating from normality, rare 'acts of god' or 'acts of nature' that hit us from outside, their sheer number and impact have propelled a reconsideration of these notions. As elaborated below in this chapter, we argue that disasters should not be deemed exceptional and need to be seen as part of 'normal, daily life' for most of those affected by them. Similarly, we will argue that disasters are in effect not 'natural' phenomena, but as much produced by human activity and politics as triggered by natural causes.

After this first delimitation and description of our subject, we now embark on the journey of disaster studies through the last half century and first look into the origin of the discipline.

3. The origin of disaster studies: the naturalist-pragmatic perspective

Disaster studies as an academic discipline and practice emerged in the United States in response to real-world events and demands from the policy world. For some time it had a rather applied and policy-driven focus, but nonetheless important academic efforts were made to systematize and develop knowledge in the field. The founding fathers of the discipline, Gilbert White and Enrico Quarantelli, were working at the University of Colorado, Boulder and the University of Delaware, where they established the Natural Hazards Centre and the Disaster Research Centre, respectively.

In the United States it took a long time before serious public engagement with disaster took effect. As Dyson states, "laissez-faire ideology wove easily into fatalistic strands of American theology that preached that disasters were 'acts of God' that no government could foresee or prevent. (…) Laissez-faire appeals to the provenance of the market held in check challenges to corporate power and building codes, even when greed and negligence were clearly the source of disaster".[10] Most federal legislation and efforts limited themselves to disaster relief. However, in the 1930s the Tennessee Valley Authority came into being with the partial aim to reduce flooding, while "the Flood Control Act of 1934 granted greater authority to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to design and craft flood-control projects".[11]

[10] M.E. DYSON: *Come hell or high water. Hurricane Katrina and the color of disaster* (New York 2007) 38.
[11] DYSON: *Come hell or high water* 51.

Disaster management originally focused on the hazards or natural agents that lay at the root of the disasters and tried to mediate these by mainly technocratic, planning or infrastructural solutions and measures by public agencies such as the US Army Corps of Engineers and, since 1979, the often-criticized Federal Emergency Management Agency FEMA.[12] In those early years there was an emphasis on constructing levies and dams and zoning policies rather than seeking to implement behavioral change or addressing the root causes of vulnerability, as emerged as a disaster policy in the 1990s. In the conceptualization of disaster, the natural hazard or agent took a prime place and remedies were sought through technocratic and managerial measures that were implemented in a centralistic, top-down and military-style manner, often with the involvement of the Department of Defense.

In the 1970s and 1980s the discipline and policy practice started to change and also spread outside the United States to various applied and academic centers around the world. It also experienced a shift in focus: from what was initially a more natural science and hazard orientation to including a social-science perspective with attention to the human context and the affected populations. Still later it increasingly adopted a more explicit anthropological and ethnographic focus as well as a more critical stance vis-à-vis governmental policy. Overall, disaster studies witnessed paradigmatic shifts in line with developments in the broader social sciences. The sections below will discuss some of these changes in larger detail.

4. The vulnerability perspective

The vulnerability perspective came into being in the 1980s as a reaction to the rather apolitical and technical disaster approaches developed in the previous decades largely in the United States. The emphasis on vulnerability was associated with a shift from seeing disaster as an event caused by an external natural agent to a more sociologically oriented interpretation of disaster as a complex, socially (as well as politically, environmentally and economically) constructed process. This view was promoted by, among others, Wisner et al. in their well-known disaster pressure and release model depicting the progression of

[12] For an overview, see C.B. RUBIN (ed.): *Emergency management. The American experience 1900-2010* (Boca Raton 2012[2]).

vulnerability.[13] The pressure-and-release model shows the structural causes, dynamic processes and unsafe conditions that produce vulnerability. Natural hazards and triggers put pressure on these conditions in such a way such that the vulnerabilities are 'released'. The vulnerable are caught between structural conditions and incidental shocks, like a nut between the two legs of a nutcracker. Vulnerability is seen by Wisner et al. as

> the characteristics of a person or group and their situation that influence their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impact of a natural hazard (an extreme natural event or process). It involves a combination of factors that determine the degree to which someone's life, livelihood, property and other assets are put at risk by a discrete and identifiable event (or series or 'cascades' of such events) in nature and in society.[14]

The risk of being exposed to disaster had become recognized as a product of hazard and vulnerability, as expressed by Wisner et al. in the pseudo-formula R = H x V.[15] Vulnerability was seen in turn as actively created by factors such as bad governance, bad development practice and political and military destabilization. Vulnerability, therefore, was not a given, but an outcome, a product of a particular economic, social and political context.

The great advantage of the idea of vulnerability is that it emphasizes a larger array of non-technical factors and more easily enabled policy intervention. Whereas it might have seemed difficult or even nearly impossible in many circumstances to reduce risk by influencing the underlying hazard, vulnerability as the resultant of socio-economic and political processes was more conducive to policy action. This was especially the case as vulnerability became increasingly associated with its opposite: namely, the element of capacity engendered in individuals, groups and local communities to cope with crisis, which also provided a suitable point of entry for disaster reduction. To this aspect we shall pay further attention below in the section dealing with the agential perspective.

Examples of vulnerability as the resultant of socio-economic and political processes can be found in the classical work *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* by Nobel laureate Amartya Sen.[16] He argued that famines can be better explained with reference to government policy and economic data than by rain figures or

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[13] B. WISNER, P. BLAIKIE, T. CANNON & I. DAVIS: *At risk. Natural hazards, people's vulnerability and disasters* (London/New York 2004^2) 51.
[14] WISNER, BLAIKIE, CANNON & DAVIS: *At Risk* 11.
[15] R=Risk, H=Hazard, V=Vulnerability
[16] A. SEN: *Poverty and famines. An essay on entitlement and deprivation* (Oxford 1981).

food availability decline. Sen introduced the idea of food entitlements, combining an economic and political approach. Similarly, floods and landslides are the result of deforestation on hill slopes by farmers pushed upstream by commercial mono-cropping agriculture or the outright plunder of the rainforest by commercial interests or warlords. The disasters following hurricane Mitch (1998, Central America) have been attributed to marginal settlements being pushed into high-risk areas by uncontrolled urban sprawl and speculative land markets as well as the expansion of the agricultural frontier.[17]

Not surprisingly, David Alexander, in an overview article about the state of disaster studies on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the Journal *Disasters* in 1997, asserted that the emergence of the notion of vulnerability was one of the most salient achievements in the field of disaster studies during the last decades.[18] It convincingly did away with the notion of disaster as a natural phenomenon, as Alexander observed: “it is now widely recognised that “natural disaster” is a convenience term that amounts to a misnomer. Neither disasters nor the conditions that give rise to them are undeniably natural”.[19]

The vulnerability approach also called into question earlier, ill-conceived ideas of ‘normality’ and ‘abnormality’ that pervaded much thinking about disaster. Disaster often used to be seen as an abnormality or an aberration from a linear path of progress rather than a chronic condition as much caused by development as impinging on it. As Oliver-Smith observes,

> disasters in general are portrayed as non-routine, destabilizing, causing uncertainty, disorder and socio-cultural collapse. In such descriptions there is clearly an emphasis on distinguishing disasters from ordinary, everyday realities that are characterized explicitly and implicitly as possessing a higher degree of predictability. (…) Such an assumption dangerously ignores that most disasters are ultimately explainable in terms of the normal order.[20]

Lavell, for example, showed that in the Lower Lempa River Valley Project in El Salvador ‘disaster risk’ became combined with ‘lifestyle’ or ‘everyday’ risk, stating that “the

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[17] F. GRUNEWALD, V. DE GEOFFROY & S. LISTER: *NGO Responses to hurricane mitch: Evaluations for accountability and learning* (= HPN Network Paper 34) (2000).

[18] D. ALEXANDER: ‘The study of natural disasters, 1977-1997. Some reflections on a changing field of knowledge’, in *Disasters* 21/4 (1997) 283-304.

[19] ALEXANDER: ‘The study of natural disasters’ 289.

[20] A. OLIVER-SMITH: ‘Peru’s five-hundred-year earthquake: Vulnerability in historical context’, in A. OLIVER-SMITH & S.M. Hoffman (eds.): *The angry earth. Disaster in anthropological perspective* (London 1999) 23.

sum of their permanent living conditions signify that the poor or destitute live under permanent conditions of disaster".[21] An important policy implication was the emphasis put on reducing everyday risk and vulnerability as a significant contribution to disaster risk reduction. "Vulnerability to disasters and lifestyle vulnerability are part of the same package and must be tackled together in the search to reduce overall human insecurity or risk".[22]

As the UNDP's Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery Disaster Risk Index reveals, disasters hit poor people disproportionally (BCPR 2004). The poor not only have less means to recover from disasters, a disaster often pushes them back into poverty, which makes them again more vulnerable to the next disaster.[23] It can be concluded that the concept of vulnerability has put structural issues center stage in disaster analysis, thereby emphasizing how disaster is intertwined with everyday risks propelled by ongoing, 'normal' socio-economic and political societal processes. It calls into question both the natural character and exceptionalism of disaster.

While the vulnerability approach was widely adopted in the world of development and disaster in the 1990s, one criticism points out that it victimizes and disempowers people by over-emphasizing the weaknesses and victimcy of disaster-affected populations. It engenders a fatalistic and passive outlook and takes away the agency from people, thereby creating external dependency and passivity instead of empowering them. In effect, vulnerability is externally attributed to groups of people, who rarely label themselves as vulnerable.

5. The agential perspective – looking at capacities and resilience

Already during the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR) of 1990-2000 the prevailing disaster paradigms were critically discussed. The dominant disaster management model was deemed too technocratic and being characterized by top-down management. The vulnerability approach, although it has the potential to activate and

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[21] A. LAVELL: 'The lower Lempa river valley, El Salvador. Risk reduction and development project', in G. BANKOFF, G. FRERKS & D. HILHORST (eds.): *Mapping vulnerability. Disasters, development & people* (London 2004) 67-82, p. 72.

[22] LAVELL: 'The lower Lempa river valley' 72.

[23] M. HELMER AND D. HILHORST: 'Natural disasters and climate change', in *Disasters* 30/1 (2006) 1-4.

mobilize resistance, was nonetheless often seen as boxing affected communities into the role of victim.[24]

More than a decade earlier Mary Anderson and Peter Woodrow had already stressed the capacities that disaster victims possess: "Disaster victims have important capacities that are not destroyed in a disaster. Outside aid to these victims must be provided in ways that recognize and support these capacities if it is to have a long-term effect. When relief assistance is given without recognition of these capacities, it can undermine and weaken them, leaving those whom it is intended to help even worse off than they were".[25]

Capacity refers to the actors' skills, resources and strengths to help themselves and others. It was realized that more often than not in the wake of a disaster people are first helped by their immediate neighbors. The concept of capacity mediates the relative weight of people's vulnerability and the associated idea that they are helplessly captured in suppressive systemic mechanisms. The emphasis on capacity takes into account people's agency and recognizes their own practices to cope with disaster. Several tools have been developed in order to assess both people's vulnerabilities and capacities. Terry Cannon, John Twigg, and Jennifer Rowell have made an inventory of over fifty instruments that deal with vulnerability and capacity aspects.[26]

In the volume *Mapping Vulnerability, Disasters, Development & People,* the authors also drew attention to the agency of disaster survivors and their capacities.[27] To include this important element in the earlier mentioned pseudo-formula of Wisner et al., the volume proposed to read this as R = H x V / C[28], thereby including the element of capacity explicitly as part of the equation. The various authors showed how disasters and disaster knowledge were historical and social constructions and the product of perceptions, social practices and discourses.

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[24] BANKOFF, FRERKS & HILHORST: *Mapping Vulnerability*.
[25] M. ANDERSON, P. WOODROW: *Rising from the ashes. Development strategies in times of disaster* (Boulder/San Francisco/Paris 1989) 136.
[26] T. CANNON, J. TWIGG & J. ROWELL: 'Social Vulnerability, Sustainable Livelihoods and Disasters' (Report to DFID Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance Department (CHAD) and Sustainable Livelihoods Support Office) (2003). Available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254398816_Social_Vulnerability_Sustainable_Livelihoods_and_Disasters.
[27] BANKOFF, FRERKS & HILHORST: *Mapping Vulnerability*.
[28] C=Capacity

From vulnerability and capacity to resilience

In recent years, resilience has rapidly become a mainstream notion in disaster studies. As with disaster itself, the definition of resilience has been subject to considerable debate. At the very least, resilience means the ability to survive and cope with a disaster with minimum impact and damage and to return to the original situation, reflecting the idea of equilibrium, as originally defined by the ecologist Crawford Holling.[29] This minimum definition was later expanded to include more social and institutional aspects and to give it a more dynamic and longer-term perspective. According, to Susan Cutter et al., for example,

> resilience refers to the ability of human systems to respond and to recover. It includes those inherent conditions that allow the system to absorb impacts and cope with the event, as well as post-event adaptive processes that facilitate the ability of the systems to recognize, change and learn in response to the event.[30]

Fran Norris et al. define it as follows: Resilience is

> a process linking a set of adaptive capacities to a positive trajectory of functioning and adaptation after a disturbance or adversity. …. Community resilience emerges from four primary sets of adaptive capacities – Economic Development, Social Capital, Information and Communication and Community Competence – that together provide a strategy for disaster readiness.[31]

These definitions move beyond the systemic equilibrium thinking evidenced in Holling's work. They also emphasize a number of common elements: namely, the capacity or ability to anticipate risk or disturbance, absorb or limit impact, and bounce back after a crisis. Additional elements, however, include the adaptive community capacity, the notions of change, competence and learning. It must also be stressed that those capacities and abilities are not some mysteriously in-built systemic property or even a capability 'owned' by individual persons or organizations, but are a collective, shared or networked property based on and requiring specific forms of management and interaction. On the basis of these considerations, Georg Frerks et al. define resilience as "the shared capacity (of a group,

[29] C.S. HOLLING: 1986. 'The resilience of terrestrial ecosystems. Local surprise and global change', in W.C. CLARK & R.E. MUNN (eds.): *Sustainable Development of the Biosphere* (Cambridge 1986) 292-317, p. 296.
[30] S.L. CUTTER ET AL.: 'A place-based model for understanding community resilience to natural disasters', in *Global Environmental Change* 18/4 (2008) 598-606.
[31] F.H. NORRIS ET AL.: 'Community resilience as a metaphor, theory, set of capacities, and strategy for disaster readiness', in the *American Journal of Community Psychology* 41/1-2 (2008) 127-150.

community or society to anticipate, resist, absorb, and recover from an adverse or disturbing event or process through adaptive and innovative social processes of change, entrepreneurship, learning and increased competence”.[32]

In this connection, the strength of the resilience approach is that it is human-centered and community-focused, but simultaneously situated in a larger macro-setting of environmental, macro-economic and policy processes and cognizant of global-local dynamics. It is also interdisciplinary and multi-layered, requiring new forms of stakeholders’ engagement and public-private partnerships.

Though resilience thinking could be considered a step forward by further elaborating the capacity approach in a societally more encompassing manner, it also received serious criticisms due to its covert political agenda. Frerks asserts in this connection that the resilience approach can be considered as part of the larger neoliberal project that is taking hold of contemporary society.[33] In terms of (risk) governance it relates to a model that includes a liberalized economy and a retreating state. Frerks refers to several authors who have claimed that this neoliberal ordering of the world has led, on the one hand, to an interventionist attempt to govern and control parts of the globe, implying the erosion of civil rights and liberties, while on the other hand it is excluding and marginalizing those people deemed useless, who have been called the ‘insecured’ or ‘surplus life’[34] or ‘wasted lives’[35]. Julian Reid suggests that “the resilient subject is a subject which must permanently struggle to accommodate itself to the world”.[36] In doing so, resilience backgrounds the political, the imagining of alternatives, and foregrounds adaptivity, accepting “the imperative not to resist or secure themselves from the difficulties they are faced with”.[37] Jon Coaffee and Peter Rogers claim similarly that the notion of social resilience has been instrumentalized, leading to a new governance and policy structure exerting domination and causing inequality.[38] In

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[32] G. Frerks, J. Warner & B. Weijs: ‘The politics of vulnerability and resilience’, in *Ambiente & Sociedade* 14/2 (2011) 105-122, p. 113.
[33] G. Frerks: ‘Help or hindrance? The contribution of the resilience approach to risk governance’, in Urbano Fra Paleo (ed.): *Risk governance. The articulation of hazard, politics and ecology* (Dordrecht/Heidelberg/New York/London 2015) 489-494.
[34] M. Duffield: *Development, security and unending war. Governing the world of peoples* (Cambridge 2007).
[35] Z. Bauman: *Wasted lives. Modernity and its outcasts* (Cambridge 2003).
[36] J. Reid: ‘The disastrous and politically debased subject of resilience’ (= paper presented at the symposium on the biopolitics of development: Life, welfare, and unruly populations, 9-10 September 2010) 3. http://www.mcrg.ac.in/Development/draft_Symposium/Julian.pdf.
[37] Reid: ‘The disastrous and politically debased subject of resilience’ 3.
[38] J. Coaffee & P. Rogers: ‘Rebordering the city for new security challenges: From counter terrorism to community resilience’, in *Space and Polity* 12/2 (2008) 101-118.

this regard they refer to a ‘dark side’ to resilience planning. Frerks concludes that the emphasis on resilience is the product of a political discourse that seeks to shift the responsibility for mediating the impact of disasters from the state to the society or the individual and therefore may engender the same problems and feelings of disenchantment as the neoliberal project creates in other societal domains and the economy at large.[39]

6. A focus on governance

While the notion of resilience has simultaneously been celebrated and criticized, there has also been an increasing focus on disaster governance. The role of the public sector and of public policies is also crucial in attempts to prevent, mitigate, and respond to disasters. Regardless of whatever international aid can be offered, the responsibility to help people in need resides under international law squarely with their own government. It is here that an analysis of the government institutions, the political culture and the functioning of the public sector can provide insight into the history of a disaster and the disaster response. Joachim Ahrens and Patrick Rudolph describe the interdependence between institutional failure and susceptibility to disaster.[40] They assert that accountability, popular participation, predictability, and transparency of the administration are key factors in the promotion of sustainable development and disaster reduction. However, in many societies facing disaster, governments are weak, failing, or even collapsing. Others are plagued by corruption, ‘spoils politics’, dictatorial rule, and predatory regimes, or are subject to ‘economies of violence’. Many of them operate through systems of patronage or clientelist politics, as, for example, has been documented for the post-tsunami aid in Sri Lanka.[41] Disasters like the Indian Ocean tsunami and Katrina were a wake-up call as to the failures and weaknesses of governments and institutions to prevent and mitigate disaster.

While critical disaster studies thus dissects the role of state and public policy, there has been an unmistakable convergence in international policy towards inclusive disaster

[39] FRERKS: ‘Help or hindrance?’ 493
[40] J. AHRENS & P.M. RUDOLPH: ‘The importance of governance in risk reduction and disaster management’, in the *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* 14/4 (2006) 207-220.
[41] G. FRERKS & B. KLEM: ‘Tsunami response in Sri Lanka, report on a field visit from 6-20 February 2005’ (Wageningen/The Hague 2005). See also G. FRERKS: ‘Principles ignored and lessons unlearned. A disaster studies perspective on the tsunami experience in Sri Lanka’, in D.B. MCGILVRAY & M.R. GAMBURD (eds.): *Tsunami recovery in Sri Lanka. Ethnic and regional dimensions* (London/New York 2010) 143-162.

governance. For decades, disaster governance was organized around an emergency style of top-down, state-centered policies and institutions. But the past three decades have seen a global development shifting disaster response from reactive to proactive, from singular to more holistic, with a focus on disaster risk reduction (DRR), and from a state-centered model to forms of co-governance that recognize the importance of non-state actor involvement in disaster governance and of community-based initiatives and resilience. Starting with the 2005 Hyogo Framework for Action, and refined in the subsequent Sendai Framework for Action, the international community has converged on the principle of 'inclusive DRR', which denotes "the collaboration of a wide array of stakeholders operating across different scales".[42] In policies and meetings, the global DRR community has consistently repeated the expected advantages of inclusive DRR governance, stressing that it will lead to more inclusive and effective disaster governance.[43]

DRR platforms have now become common in most disaster-prone countries. Since 1987, United Nations member states have been invited to establish 'national committees' – co-governance platforms that should consist of multiple actors involved in DRR, including representatives of governments, international organizations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOS) and the scientific community. The United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) has actively encouraged the establishment of national governance networks "to provide and mobilise knowledge, skills and resources required for mainstreaming DRR into development policies, planning and programmes".[44] Data from UNISDR indicate that around ninety-three national platforms on DRR had developed worldwide as of 2016.[45]

7. Putting disaster into context

[42] J.C. GAILLARD & J. MERCER: 'From knowledge to action: Bridging gaps in disaster risk reduction', in *Progress in Human Geography* 37/1 (2012) 93-114, p. 95.
[43] R. DJALANTE: 'Adaptive governance and resilience: The role of multi-stakeholder platforms in Indonesia', in *Natural Hazards and Earth System Sciences* 12/9 (2012) 2923-2942.
[44] UNITED NATIONS INTERNATIONAL STRATEGY FOR DISASTER RISK REDUCTION: 'Terminology' (2007). Retrieved from https://www.unisdr.org/we/inform/terminology#letter-d.
[45] UNITED NATIONS INTERNATIONAL STRATEGY FOR DISASTER RISK REDUCTION: 'Words into action. National focal points for Disaster Risk Reduction, platforms for Disaster Risk Reduction, local platforms for Disaster Risk Reduction' (Geneva 2017). Retrieved from https://www.unisdr.org/we/inform/publications/53055.

It is quite remarkable how discourses on disaster governance have radically altered in three decades and how widely shared the notion of co-governance by involving multiple actors and focusing on risk reduction rather than merely responding after disaster have become. It raises many questions, and in particular it brings out the need to look closer at this widely shared and seldom contested idea of disaster governance by putting disaster back into context.

Firstly, it remains important to recognize the long making of disaster. Deconstructing disaster along historical, social, gendered or political dynamics leads to a deeper understanding of the nature and origin of disaster. Disasters can be seen as the historical consequence of political, economic and social processes, as Dorothea Hilhorst and Greg Bankoff remind us.

> Asking why disasters happen is a political question, but understanding how they occur is a social and historical one. Above all, it is the present condition (the outcome of past factors) that transforms a hazard into a calamity and determines whether people have the resilience to withstand its effects or are rendered vulnerable to their consequences.[46]

Secondly, refocusing disaster studies in their context enables the identification of the role of cultural practices that over time emerge in response to recurring disasters, or what has been identified as 'disaster subcultures'.[47] This concept was put forward in the 1960s and 1970s to shed light on the complex but intricate relationship between the human and natural world, yet it has continued to inspire authors such Bankoff,[48] Jean-Christophe Gaillard et al.[49] or Andrés Marín et al.[50] to denote how communities have developed particular solutions and practices that constitute unique adaptations to deal with recurrent

[46] D. HILHORST AND G. BANKOFF: 'Introduction. Mapping vulnerability', in BANKOFF, FRERKS & HILHORST: *Mapping Vulnerability* 1-9, p. 4.
[47] H.E. MOORE: *And the winds blew* (Austin 1964); D.E. WENGER & J.M. WELLER: *Some observations on the concept of disaster subculture* (= Disaster Research Center Working Paper 48) (Columbus 1972); D.E. WENGER & J.M. WELLER: *Disaster subcultures: The cultural residues of community disasters* (= University of Delaware Disaster Research Center Preliminary Paper 9) (Newark, DE 1973); W.A. ANDERSON: *Some observations on a disaster subculture: The organizational response of Cincinnati, Ohio, to the 1964 Flood* (= Disaster Research Center Research Report 6) (Columbus 1965); J.W. ANDERSON: 'Cultural adaptation to threatened disaster', in *Human Organization* 27/4 (1968) 298-307.
[48] G. BANKOFF: *Cultures of disaster. Society and natural hazards in the Philippines* (London/New York 2003).
[49] J. GAILLARD, E. CLAVE, O. VIBERT, J. DENAIN, Y. EFENDI, D. GRANCHER, C.C. LIAMZON, D. ROSNITA SARI & R. SETIAWAN: 'Ethnic groups' response to the 26 December 2004 earthquake and tsunami in Aceh, Indonesia', in *Natural Hazards* 47 (2008) 17-38.
[50] A. MARÍN, S. GELCICH, G. ARAYA, G. OLEA, M. ESPÍNDOLA & J.C. CASTILLA: 'The 2010 tsunami in Chile. Devastation and survival of coastal small-scale fishing communities', in *Marine Policy* (2010) 1381-1384.

hazards and how these practices have left their marks on the political, social and cultural fabric of society.[51]

Examples include attempts by farmers to mitigate against crop failure by drought or frost by planting at different altitudes and locations. In flood-prone areas in Vietnam and Indonesia, houses are built on stilts to protect property and stocks against the water. In Dutch villages regularly exposed to flooding, such as Borgharen and Itteren in Limburg, a disaster subculture is also prevailing in the form of architectural design of houses as well as through mutual help, cultural artefacts and warning signs in the environment.[52] As part of the disaster subcultures, attention has also been given to the role of ritual and of religion (or superstition) in preventing or averting disaster by offerings, prayers etc. In addition, in collective forms of bereavement and commemorations, ritualized behavior is often prevalent. Monuments are erected to give such rituals a form of materiality. A variety of studies have shed light on such aspects, include the seminal works of Aaron Douglas and Mary Wildavsky[53], Douglas[54] and Anthony Oliver-Smith and Susanna Hoffman[55].

Thirdly, zooming in on the context reveals how views on disasters – as well as their impacts and responses – are socially constructed. Hilhorst argues that different groups of actors perceive, understand and deal with disaster in different ways. She discerns several domains (science and disaster management, governance and local) of disaster response and asserts that these responses often contradict or negate each other.[56] Bankoff depicts natural disaster as a Western cultural discourse to characterize dangerous or problematic regions in the world, as was done earlier by the tropicality and developmental discourses.[57] Frerks et al. distinguish four disaster narratives around hazard, risk, vulnerability and resilience with each having their own idea of what security is about and what the major security referent is.[58] Maureen Fordham adds to this the context of gender relations, to better recognize the

[51] BANKOFF: *Cultures of disaster.*
[52] K. ENGEL, G. FRERKS, L. VELOTTI, J. WARNER & B. WEIJS: 'Flood disaster subcultures in The Netherlands. The parishes of Borgharen and Itteren', in *Natural Hazards* 73 (2014) 859-882.
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[55] OLIVER-SMITH & Hoffman: *The angry earth*.
[56] D. HILHORST: 'Complexity and diversity. Unlocking social domains of disaster response', in BANKOFF, FRERKS & HILHORST: *Mapping Vulnerability* 52-66, p. 57.
[57] G. BANKOFF: 'The historical geography of disaster. "Vulnerability" and "local knowledge" in Western discourse', in BANKOFF, FRERKS & HILHORST: *Mapping Vulnerability* 25-36, p. 33-34.
[58] FRERKS, WARNER & WEIJS: 'The politics of vulnerability and resilience' 106.

gendered nature of vulnerability and the dominant masculine culture manifested in disaster management and humanitarian practice.[59] In this connection, Fordham signals the importance of 'gender-fair' approaches in disaster analysis and management. A flurry of later publications has stressed the need to adopt a gendered approach, as elaborately documented by, among others, Elaine Enarson[60] and Enarson and P.G. Dhar Chakrabarti.[61]

Finally, studying disaster in context can reveal what can be labeled as the 'real' disaster governance, or the ways in which different groups of actors perceive, understand and act upon disaster in different ways, and how this is socially negotiated in the everyday practices of disaster response.[62] Rather than assuming that disaster response is governed according to the models internationally agreed upon, we advocate studying disaster response as an interplay between national authorities, civil society, international actors and affected communities.[63] Empirically, we need to look beyond the design of governance to questions of how this works out in practice – what some authors refer to as 'real' governance.[64] This will bring back in the power dimensions that Ahrens and Rudolph identified as crucial in any disaster response.[65] It will also provide an empirical underpinning to how actors deal with disaster, rather than simply assuming that disaster brings out the best in people and will trigger collaboration or, alternatively its opposite, that people panic and behave irrationally, are always true.

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