

PHYSICIAN, HEAL THYSELF?

The politics of disaster mitigation

John Twigg
Benfield Greig Hazard Research Centre
University College London

January 2001

1. INTRODUCTION

My interest is not in the scientific aspects of *hazards* but in the ways that society and its institutions manage *disasters*, especially with regard to developing countries. In this discussion paper, I look at some of the reasons why so little is being done to reduce people's vulnerability to natural disasters, and I suggest that part of the problem lies within the so-called disaster 'community' and is political, in the broadest sense of the word.

2. IMPACT OF NATURAL DISASTERS

There should be no doubt about the scale of the problem. According to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), natural disasters killed on average more than 56,000 people each year between 1988 and 1997. Over the same period, they affected 171 million people directly (in terms of damage to homes, property, crops and livestock, and local infrastructure) while the number affected indirectly (for example by rising prices or job losses caused by adverse economic consequences) is incalculable. The average annual economic loss worldwide from natural disasters between 1988 and 1997 amounted to \$62 billion (of which \$26 billion was in Europe and the USA, and \$34 billion in Asia). All of these are conservative estimates.

Developing countries are hit the hardest by natural disasters. Again according to the IFRC, between 1988 and 1997, on average 88% of deaths from natural disasters each year were in developing countries. Over the same period, on average 98% of those directly affected each year lived in developing countries. If the countries of the former Soviet Union are included, the figures go up to around 95% and 99% respectively.

Most of the economic losses are felt in wealthier countries, but the economic impact on developing countries is also severe. For example, the Bangladesh floods in 1998 resulted in some \$5 billion in economic losses. Hurricane Mitch in October 1998 caused economic losses to the value of \$5 billion in Central America.

The impact of disasters is not felt evenly within countries, either. Studies have shown that in general it is the weaker groups in society that suffer worst from disasters: the poor (especially), the very young and the very old, women, the disabled, and those who are marginalised by race or caste.

3. VULNERABILITY

The difference between a *hazard* and a *disaster* is an important one. We are concerned about natural hazards because they might lead to disasters. A disaster is the impact of a hazard on a community/society – usually defined as an event that overwhelms that community/society's capacity to cope.

In other words, the impact of a disaster is determined by the extent of a society's *vulnerability* to hazard. Vulnerability is the human dimension of disasters. To understand what makes people vulnerable, we have to move away from the hazard itself to look at a much wider, and a much more diverse, set of influences: the whole range of economic, social, cultural, institutional, political and even psychological factors that shape people's lives and create the environment that they live in.

For example we do not look at the mere fact that people live in flimsy houses in hazardous locations, but why they live there – which could be the product of poverty (itself the result of local, national or even global economic forces), demographic processes such as population growth or migration to towns and cities, legal-political issues such as land rights, and other political features such as the weakness of government and civil society institutions in protecting citizens. In other words, vulnerability is socially constructed.

Recent major 'natural' disasters provide plenty of examples of these aspects of vulnerability. Two illustrations are given here: Hurricane Mitch (1998) and the Turkish earthquake (1999).

Hurricane Mitch struck the coastline of Central America in October 1998. The scientific jury is still out on just how big an impact deforestation had in causing the floods and landslides that killed so many people, but it clearly had some impact and was probably significant. Deforestation is the result of commercial logging, expansion of peasant farming into new lands and the growth of urban slums – all in turn are the consequence of broader trends in the region's political economy, with one of the major factors being landholding: for example, peasant farmers in Honduras have been displaced by large-scale beef ranching and banana plantations. Local and international organisations were also quick to link the region's poverty – and hence, vulnerability – with its high levels of external debt.

The Turkish earthquake in 1999 killed perhaps 17,000 people. This was not the result of a lack of scientific or engineering expertise. Areas of seismic activity are mapped in Turkey, and Turkish building codes are quite strict. But in practice, regulation was lax, and as a result unsafe buildings were put up in unsafe areas. Weak government was clearly an important causal factor in the disaster, but not the only one: economic

and demographic trends had created something of a housing boom in many towns – encouraging rapid construction of apartment blocks and putting pressure on the regulatory system.

Few of these aspects of vulnerability are normally considered part of disaster management but all have a profound bearing on a disaster's impact. These are very complex issues of sustainable development and this is why natural disasters in developing countries are often described as 'unsolved problems of development'.

Complex problems demand equally complex responses, going well beyond the remit of traditional disaster managers and emergency planners. They require concerted action by multilateral agencies, national and local government agencies of many different kinds, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), scientists and other technical specialists – and, of course, communities.

4. DISASTER MITIGATION: RHETORIC AND REALITY

It is generally accepted that disaster mitigation pays. For example, the World Bank and United States Geological Survey once calculated that economic losses worldwide from natural disasters during the 1990s could be reduced by \$280 billion if \$40 billion were invested in disaster mitigation and preparedness – a ratio of \$7 saved for every \$1 spent. The Federal Emergency Management Agency in the USA reckons that every dollar spent on natural disaster preparedness and mitigation saves it \$2 in emergency relief expenditure.

The United Nations decided that the 1990s should be the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR). National governments, and international aid and donor agencies, all signed up to the Decade and its aims. Reading the public statements of such agencies, and the resolutions of recent UN conferences, one could be forgiven for assuming that there is a massive international drive to implement risk reduction measures, yet, as UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan conceded in 1999 when he addressed the IDNDR's closing conference, 'the number and cost of natural disasters continue to rise'.

Why is this? A charitable view would be that it is too soon to see the impact of the efforts that have been made, but it is also clear that many of the international community's commitments were little more than rhetorical. Kofi Annan pointed to this problem in his speech in 1999. He said: 'We know what has to be done. What is now required is the political commitment to do it.'

Is this true, and if so what is it that weakens the will of decision makers and practitioners in the aid industry to reduce the risk of future disasters? I believe that Kofi Annan is right, and that, while we must concede that the scale and complexity of the problem are inhibiting, other causes can be found within the attitudes and cultures of the different kinds of institution involved in disaster reduction work.

In support of this assertion, I would like to highlight four features exhibited by different actors in the aid and disaster industry and to suggest that they are all, in different ways, *political*.

(i) The politics of response

This feature is common to many institutions but can be seen particularly well among international aid and donor agencies, and national governments.

One of the best indicators of the international aid community's commitment to resolving an issue is the amount of money they spend on it. To the major humanitarian aid donors, disaster mitigation and preparedness are marginal. For example, the European Union is the world's largest humanitarian aid giver, yet over recent years the European Community Humanitarian Office's disaster preparedness budget line has accounted for less than 1% of its total spending on disasters. In Britain, the Department for International Development's disaster mitigation and preparedness budget line has in recent years generally accounted for about 3% of its total spending on disasters. In both ECHO and DFID, disaster mitigation is falling even further from favour now that the IDNDR is over.

In contrast, international donor agencies often spend large amounts of money on humanitarian relief – emergency aid budgets rocketed during the 1990s, and large amounts of relief aid are generally available whenever a major disaster strikes. Donor agencies respond to disasters because of moral pressure, from the media and public, to do something. This pressure makes the immediate consequences of the disaster a short-term political issue requiring attention; but there is no similar impetus to address that disaster's causes and its long-term effects.

The media are not blameless here either. They are no less responsive to events, and their overriding interest in technical details, body counts and any political rows/scandals during a disaster (e.g. over the cost of helicopters for Mozambique after the floods, or Clare Short's 'golden elephants' jibe during the Montserrat crisis) diverts attention from analysis of why the disaster took place.

National governments, too, often wait on events rather than anticipating them. The Montserrat crisis that began in 1995 is a good example of this. A recent major evaluation of the British Government's response to the volcanic emergency on Montserrat saw the problems as essentially those of governance. It found that there was apparently no contingency planning for how the British Government should manage an emergency in an Overseas Territory. *Ad hoc* arrangements had to be put in place, and this was done reactively as the eruption progressed – both in the Government of Montserrat and the British Government, there was a 'wait and see' policy for the first two years of the crisis. Since then, the emergency planning system has been greatly improved – it often takes a disaster to stimulate progress.

(ii) Political opportunism

Disasters, like any other event, can be caught up in political disputes or exploited for narrowly political ends. The 1997/8 El Niño event provides two examples of this, in Ethiopia and Peru.

In Ethiopia, the Government took the risk of erratic weather and drought caused by El Niño very seriously from an early stage, and subsequent events showed that it was right to do so. However, international donors and NGOs felt that this was a face-saving excuse by the Government to account for earlier over-optimistic forecasts about food production, and were unwilling to take action. The resulting political impasse made adequate contingency planning impossible and, when finally overtaken by events, the international aid community could only respond to the food shortage through its normal relief mechanisms.

The management of the El Niño event in Peru reveals something more cynically political. The government there spent \$300 million in advance on mitigation measures, but the most conspicuous feature of this work was the highly public role played in it by President Fujimori. Repairing dykes and digging channels provided great photo-opportunities for a president whose popularity was falling and who would be facing an election campaign in 2000. The interventions were planned in the expectation that the impact of the event would be similar to that of the previous large-scale El Niño, and in the same locations, but this did not happen, and the Government of Peru then attempted to play down the damage and suppress damage statistics, in order to save face. Control of funding for reconstruction was centrally controlled by the presidency, which gave Fujimori further photo-opportunities. His poll ratings went up from 30% in mid-1997 to 45% in mid-1998. But his establishment of parallel disaster management structures controlled by the presidency to deal with the El Niño event by-passed the established civil defence and local government mechanisms, leading to confusion and conflict in disaster response.

(iii) Inter-disciplinary politics

Part of the problem lies in the attitudes of people in what is often called the disaster 'community' – i.e. those who are professionally engaged in efforts to prevent disasters and deal with their consequences. Like most communities, this one is not homogeneous. It consists of a diverse range of professional disciplines including physical scientists (of many different kinds: earth scientists, hydrologists, meteorologists, etc.), social scientists (also of many different kinds including anthropologists, sociologists and economists), engineers, architects, doctors, psychologists, development and emergency planners, and humanitarian relief workers. It comprises people from very different organisational settings such as international aid agencies, governments (at all levels), NGOs and other civil society organisations, academics, consultants and private sector interests of various kinds.

Disasters are complex problems demanding a holistic response from these different disciplinary and institutional groups, but they rarely get this. All too often, the disaster community is characterised by:

- fragmentation along disciplinary and institutional boundaries (one of the key fault lines being between those who work on hazards and those who work on disasters)
- a lack of understanding between different disciplines, and often a lack of mutual respect
- a lack of dialogue between different actors (often accompanied by lack of mutual respect) – e.g. between physical and social scientists; between governments and NGOs; between so-called ‘experts’ from developed countries and people in developing countries
- a culture of competitiveness and professional jealousy (fuelled by competition for funds)
- insufficient humility in the face of the disaster problem; a greater readiness to talk than to listen

Another critical failing is that disaster specialists and people working on long-term sustainable development programmes tend to act in isolation from each other. Long-term risk/vulnerability reduction must become an integral part of development programmes, but to date development workers have thought only in terms of one-off disasters, which they have seen as a problem for the humanitarian aid sector. One of the biggest disappointments of the IDNDR was its failure to draw the development community into the movement for disaster reduction.

(iv) Participation and accountability

The USA is a very hazardous country, but copes well with its many hazards. This is partly because it is a wealthy country that can afford extensive disaster reduction measures, but also because it has a relatively open democratic system and a tradition of active citizenship that leads to citizens’ demands that its government (at all levels) protects them. Those who work in disaster management should accept that they bear a heavy responsibility to those who live at risk but do not have the same resources or opportunities to attain security. However, one sees little recognition of this.

We could all be made more aware of our responsibilities if we spent more time in contact with vulnerable people – or at the very least, those who work with them. Representatives of developing countries are all too rare at international expert gatherings, and come mostly from government and top research or scientific institutes. Representatives of civil society, especially grass-roots organisations, are very rare indeed. The resulting imbalance of influence leads to narrowly conceived international disaster reduction initiatives that often fail to address the real problems of vulnerable people.

Those who work in long-term development have learnt over the years, slowly and sometimes painfully, that without a thorough contextual understanding of local communities – their needs, skills, structures and cultures – even the most well-meaning attempts at aid are likely to fail. Vulnerability, and local skills in coping with hazard, are part of this context. The only way to acquire this understanding is by learning from the communities themselves. The most effective of today’s development initiatives are those where community members are participants in

planning, managing and evaluating them, drawing on outside assistance as and when they require it and not because it is thrust upon them.

Participation of this kind is a cornerstone of modern development practice. It requires a shift in power away from the outside expert, and is therefore political. Development becomes less of a *diktat*, more of a dialogue between different groups of experts, within and outside the community. Participatory approaches are beginning to find their way into disaster management, but still have a lot of ground to make up.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Disasters triggered by natural hazards are a major global problem, especially in developing countries. People's vulnerability to disasters is socially constructed and complex. In order to make progress in reducing the impact of disasters, there must be concerted international action, yet the political will to do this is lacking among donors, governments and disaster professionals. There needs to be greater and more meaningful collaboration between different members of the disaster 'community', between disaster and development professionals, and between disaster managers and vulnerable communities.

Note

This discussion paper is based on the author's contribution to a panel discussion at the conference 'Natural Hazards and the No-Risk Society' held at University College London on 7 July 2000.