



**Non-Governmental
Public Action
Programme**

Preliminary Research Findings Brief

Comparative Study of Natural Disasters in India, Iran and Indonesia

Project aims, objectives, methods

Catastrophic natural disasters have killed of thousands of people in the last decade. The images of devastation wrought by earthquakes, waves and winds are familiar to us all. Also well-known, are the often heroic attempts of rescue teams and aid organisations to provide relief and comfort to the affected and displaced. Less attention is given to what happens in the years that follow to those who lived through the disaster. How do they live with the material, emotional and environmental consequences? How do people go about restoring order when order is taken away from them?

By looking, ethnographically, at the long-term consequences of earthquakes in India and Pakistan and the tsunami in Sri Lanka, the project confronts these questions. One of the consistent things about natural disasters in history is that they prompt a rethinking of local social orders. The earthquake that destroyed Lisbon in the 18th century, for example, prompted many of the greatest thinkers of the age to question God's power over nature.

Similarly, elsewhere in the world, people have often radically questioned the ways in which their society is ordered after catastrophic disasters. Sometimes, old gods are found wanting and are discarded as others are drafted in. Peace between warring factions can be made, and other ethnic, religious or class-based conflicts may intensify – as the spoils of the 'disaster boom' economy are fought for.

The spaces between ordinary people, governments and international organisations are where non-governmental collective action occurs. Such collective forms of action shape the ways in which people come together to grieve, remember, lobby and, always it seems, to protest about inequalities after natural disasters.

The project examines, ethnographically, how collective forms of social action emerge in the aftermath of natural disasters, how societies are re-ordered through their actions, and what relation these forms of collective action have to society as it existed before disaster.

The main aim of the project is to tell the story of reconstruction from the perspective of those who were affected by disaster and braved life in the aftermath. The project is not primarily intended as a development manual, nor as a critical appraisal of reconstruction efforts of conventional NGOs; rather, it is an exploration of the everyday life of the post-disaster reconstruction, the part that is usually masked by the jargon of the aptly named 'grey literature', by superficial journalism, and by the anodyne language of governments. The emphasis is on how ordinary people understood catastrophe, who they blamed and cursed, how they perceived the interventions of the government, and how they collectively went about restoring passable conditions in which they could live out their own lives.

The comparative aspect of the project aims to generate general statements about patterns of non-governmental public action in the aftermath of natural disasters and suggest possible implications that this material has for policymakers and the strategic interventions of funding bodies and multilateral agencies.

Key research findings

Policy and practice implications

- Reconstruction initiatives in the aftermath of natural disasters are invariably accompanied by popular political protest.
- Such protest regenerates and reconfigures civil society.
- The aftermath of natural disasters can be a time of social strength and opportunity, not necessarily a time of weakness and dependency.
- Often, these 'vernacular' forms of civil society are invisible to international donors because they are configured along culturally specific lines, such as those of caste or religion.
- Indigenous forms of social organisation are poorly understood by governments and multi-lateral agencies.
- Because local forms of non-governmental action are invisible to the foreign eye, parallel systems of reconstruction may emerge.
- Parallel systems lead to the uneven distribution of resources and inefficient or inappropriate patterns of reconstruction and create new divisions within populations.
- Indigenous forms of non-governmental public action should be central rather than peripheral to the policies and practices of reconstruction in the aftermath of natural disasters.

Key publications and outputs

Simpson, E. 2007. 'The history of Bhuj as told by its own historians' in E. Simpson and K. Kresse (eds) *Struggling with History: Islam and cosmopolitanism in the western Indian Ocean*. London: Hurst and Columbia University Press.

Simpson, E. 2007. 'The rituals of rehabilitation: Rebuilding an urban neighbourhood after the Gujarat earthquake of 2001.' In H. Donner & G. De Neve (eds) *The meaning of the local: Politics of place in urban India*. London: UCL (Cavendish Publishing) Press.

Simpson, E. 2007. 'The state of play six years after the Gujarat earthquake.' *Economic and Political Weekly*, March 17th.

Corbridge, S. & E. Simpson 2006. 'Militant cartographies and traumatic spaces: Ayodhya, Bhuj and the contested geographies of Hindu nationalism.' In S. Raju, S. Kumar and S. Corbridge (eds) *Colonial and postcolonial geographies of India*. New Delhi and London: Sage.

For further information

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