Why are some disasters neglected and are crisis states neglected disasters?

Ben Wisner
(Senior Visiting Fellow, Crisis States Research Centre)

Wednesday 28th January 2009 - Room U201, Tower One, London School of Economics

What I want to discuss today are three questions. Two are more general and to some extent preliminary. So I shall give them brief treatment and we can return to them if you wish during discussion. The third question is, I think, central to the concerns of the Crisis States Programme.

The questions concern the nature of neglect in international humanitarian studies, policy, and practice and what forms “neglect may take”. The second asks whether the condition of being a fragile, crisis or failed state is in any of these senses neglected and, if so, why. Finally, my chief concern is to ask if the Crisis States Programme has, in fact, neglected humanitarian crises triggered by extreme natural events (those events usually misnamed “natural” disasters, because the trigger is confused with cause, thus ignoring the chronic and acute situation of people’s vulnerability to natural hazard events).

Before I continue it’s important to be clear why I reject the notion of a “natural disaster.” Understanding this, and also why the persistence of old fashioned ideas such as “Act of God” and the “naturalness” of disaster explain some forms of neglect.

In 1976 I co-authored an essay in the journal Nature entitled “Taking the ‘Naturalness’ out of ‘Natural’ Disaster. At the time young field workers such as I too was at the time had reported numerous cases where lack of access to land, dispossession and displacement, encouragement and even forced cultivation of export crops had pushed marginal people into marginal places. When hurricane Fifi hit NE Honduras in 1974, poor farmers had already been dispossessed and displaced from the valley bottoms by
corporate banana production and had cleared steep valley slopes for subsistence. These slopes gave way catastrophically due to Fifi’s rainfall, killing 7,000 people. In Bangladesh in 1970, landless laborers were asleep in the fields they were harvesting on the low lying silt islands off shore in the Bay of Bengal with a cyclone swept them away without warning. At least 500,000 died. As the French activist group, Comite d’Information Sahel, reported concerning the impact of drought in the Sahel in the early 1970s, cotton was still exported as hundreds of thousands of children died of a combination of hunger and measles. Expansion of groundnut cultivation for export to France – ensuring cheap cooking oil for the metropolitan working class – had weakened traditional livelihood systems build around drought resistance grains and livestock. In 1976, the Mayan peasant majority in Guatemala referred to a devastating earthquake as a “class quake” because of how selective its impacts were. The homes and farms of the indigenous rural poor were located on steep slopes that slid in response to the temblors. Self-built peri-urban homes in Guatemala City collapsed; while the professionally-built houses of the rich did not.¹

Since the 1970s massive amounts of evidence have been accumulated that highlight the role of vulnerability along side the equally important natural hazards themselves. Vulnerability has many components:

- Economic – the resilience of livelihoods, availability of surplus to invest in safe protection, savings to fall back upon, insurance, credit, stable markets, diversity of income opportunities, access to land and other natural resources or to urban space;
- Social – existence and robustness of social networks, membership in associations that provide mutual aid in crises, family networks that provide assistance through wage remittances;² cultural understandings of inherited systems of self protection – whether more disaster resistant forms of traditional building, flood and drought mitigation practices, hillside terracing, etc.
- Political – access to local government decision making, having one’s voice heard, having access to local government services, infrastructure, and assistance in times of crisis.

Thus vulnerability and hazard are intimately intertwined just as are the two strands of proteins that make up the so-called double helix of DNA code. Disaster risk can neither be understood nor properly reduced through policy and practice unless BOTH vulnerability and hazard are taken into account.³

One may summarize this interaction between hazard and vulnerability as follows: R = H x V, where R stands for risk, H for hazard, and V for vulnerability. Not all people exposed are equally vulnerable. Different groups of people (differentiated by class, caste, religion, etc.) suffer different kinds and degrees of vulnerability. These groups each have local knowledge and skills that allow them some degree of ability to cope with extreme events. However, economic and political conditions may block or degrade this local knowledge and skill. If we use “C” for the capacity to cope, then the formula becomes R = (H x V)/ C. Likewise, in each situation there is a degree of social protection provided by government. Calling this degree of social protection “M” for mitigation, we have R= [(HxV)/C – M].⁴

---

**What is vulnerability?** (IFRC, 2009


Vulnerability in this context can be defined as the diminished capacity of an individual or group to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impact of a natural or man-made hazard. The concept is relative and dynamic. Vulnerability is most often associated with poverty, but it can also arise when people are isolated, insecure and defenceless in the face of risk, shock or stress. People differ in their exposure to risk as a result of their social group, gender, ethnic or other identity, age and other factors.

---

This view has not only been confirmed numerous times by social scientists. In 2000 Kerry Sieh, a geophysics professor from Caltech, published a paper with the title, “Acts of God, Acts of Man: How Humans Turn Natural Hazards into Disasters.”⁵ Sieh studied land-use decisions in relation to seismic fault lines and suggested that “we can learn where to put our bridges, campuses, houses, and factories to minimize the destruction” in the

---

³ I am grateful to Professor Dave Petley, Geography Department, Durham University, for the DNA metaphor.


third millennium. Learn as “we” might, however, the urban marginal and poor small holder farmer in Central America is still as vulnerable to “class quake” and to avoidable mudslides when hurricanes hit as their parents were in the 1970s. The earthquake in El Salvador in 2001 and Hurricanes Mitch in 1998 and Stan, which followed Katrina in 2005, showed this clearly.

1. What is Neglect?

There are many types of neglect – and the same types can be both cause and effect. For example, lack of media coverage is a manifestation common to many neglected disasters, but the failure to report on such crises is equally a cause of their neglect. One way of grasping hold of this slippery issue and the challenges it presents is through the following typology:

- **Unreported** – or under-reported, by global media.
- **Uncounted** – not registered by disaster databases or not assessed by aid organizations.
- **Unfunded** – or under-funded, by donors, aid organizations or host governments.
- **Secondary** – disasters triggered by a secondary event not prepared for by governments, aid organizations or communities.
- **Secret** – concealed by host governments for political reasons or by communities for cultural reasons.
- **Awkward** – not addressed by governments or aid organizations for political, strategic, security or logistical reasons.
- **Misunderstood** – complex crises whose causes and solutions may not be understood by experts or decision-maker.

The distinctions are somewhat artificial and some neglected crises will manifest several types of neglect at once. However, the advantage of this typology is that it reveals the roles of different players – whether journalists, donors, database managers, aid organizations, analysts, governments or affected communities – and how they could do more to highlight the plight of people whose needs are neglected. And behind these types of neglect there lies a common theme: **neglecting the root causes of socially constructed vulnerability and chronic poverty.**

---

6 BBC (2005) “Stan’s trail of destruction.” BBC Online 12 October
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4326084.stm

7 I am grateful to Allan Lavell and Jonathan Walters, who, together with myself wrote chapter 1 of the World Disaster Report 2006 (Geneva: International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies) on the theme of neglected disasters and provided editorial advice to the other chapter contributors.
For these reasons and combinations of them, response to events is very uneven. The following is how the IFRC summarized these patterns for 2005:8

“Governments donated over US$ 12 billion in bilateral humanitarian aid in 2005 – the highest figure since records began in 1970 (preliminary figures, Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Development Initiatives (DI)).

“Individuals gave over US$ 5.5 billion for survivors of the Indian Ocean tsunami – more than NGOs worldwide had ever collected in a year. Aid for the tsunami totaled over US$ 14 billion (DI).

“The tsunami was the best-funded disaster, with at least US$ 1,241 per beneficiary in humanitarian aid – 50 times more than for the worst-funded crises. Emergency appeals for Chad, Guyana, Côte d'Ivoire, Malawi and Niger raised on average less than US$ 27 per person in need (OCHA Financial Tracking Service (OCHA FTS)).

“Aid coverage remains inequitable: appeals for the Republic of Congo, Djibouti and the Central African Republic were on average less than 40 per cent funded; yet the tsunami appeal was 475 per cent funded and the South Asia earthquake appeal was 196 per cent funded (OCHA FTS).

“Media coverage sways the public and politicians. The coverage of UN appeals closely mirrors media coverage, while aid per beneficiary decreases in line with lower media coverage (WDR analysis).

“But media coverage is also uneven: Hurricane Katrina, which hit America's Gulf Coast in August 2005, killed around 1,300 people and generated 1,035 articles in Western print media during the 10 weeks following the disaster. This was 40 times more coverage than the 25 articles on Hurricane Stan that killed over 1,600 people in Guatemala shortly afterwards (CARMA International).”

In short, there is a great deal of variability and unevenness in the spatial and temporal as well as thematic focus of attention on crises and disasters by media, policy makers, donors and other funders, as well as researchers.

---

8 IFRC (2006) op. cit.
2. Are Crisis States Neglected?

Looking back at Table 1.1, the majority of situations listed as “neglected” or “forgotten” by the four sources are conflicts. What the UN calls complex humanitarian crises and its peacekeeping efforts, as well as WFP assistance for refugees and people internally displaced by conflict are chronically under-funded. So certainly in that sense of “neglect,” disasters involving crisis states may be said to be neglected.

On the whole, however, conflicts are recognized and counted, and they are reported, albeit with ebb and flow of editorial interest – for example, the ongoing conflicts in Congo, Sudan, and Colombia slipping out of major media coverage for periods of months or even years and they rebounding when there is a headline-grabbing battle or massacre or, as in the case of Colombia, high profile hostage release.
What receives very little attend is the secondary hazards and risks that people displaced by conflict experience. For example, hundreds of thousands of people displaced from Colombia’s civil war often live in peri-urban conditions that are highly exposed to public health hazards, flooding, landslides, and earthquakes. It took a major cholera epidemic to highlight the health and nutrition hazards faced by the millions of Zimbabweans who are living in conditions of hyper-inflation, economic melt-down, and collapse of the health care system and urban water supply. While Zimbabwe has commanded diplomatic and media attention for a long time as a failed state, the secondary disaster provoked by state collapse took a long time to reach a level that triggered international donor action and media attention.

Fragile, crisis, and failed states often try to keep disasters secret or minimize reports of the impacts. This has been true of North Korea’s way of dealing with food crisis and famine and with Myanmar’s initial stance regarding cyclone Nargis in 2008, an enormous disaster that cost at least 146,000 lives. Ethiopia’s attempt to keep famine quiet in 1974 is another example.

It may be that fragile states may either deny or minimize impact of a disaster, depending on the internal political situation, or it may actually exaggerate the impact in order to bring in maximum overseas assistance which is often diverted for personal profit of the elite or used to increase the political control of an elite that feels its hold on power is slipping or contested. One saw that in 1970 after the major earthquake that destroyed much of Managua, Nicaragua. Crisis and outright failed states, on the other hand, may be more likely to deny and minimize. Where donors and major powers are attempting to shore up a fragile or crisis state, as in the Cold War period when the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. each supported dictators and military regimes nominally dedicated to communism or anti-communism, disasters may be what I call “awkward.” These may or may not also be “secret” and, as a result, “uncounted.”

Another source of “awkwardness” and thus delayed or limited attention (hence a form of relative neglect) can be traced to deep involvement by donors governments and international agencies in the causation of the disaster in the first place. For example, the epidemic of arsenic poisoning due to drilling and use of deep bore holes in Bangladesh implicated UNICEF and other donors and agencies in this well-intended water supply initiative as well as Great Britain’s geological survey that had the contract for water testing but did not test for arsenic. World Bank advice to the government of
Malawi led to the latter’s decision to sell off much of its strategic grain reserve, and this led to a major food crisis some months later.

Finally, turning to misunderstanding as a source of neglect, I return to my initial thoughts about why disasters are not natural. Also one should recall the take home message from the World Disaster Report 2006 with its focus on neglected and forgotten disasters -- once more: the common theme found in all cases of neglect is “neglecting the root causes of socially constructed vulnerability and chronic poverty.”

The most common and influential misunderstanding of disaster that underlies much neglect or even invisibility, is a confusion of event with process. Despite many years attempts to de-naturalize disaster, they are still seen as rare or at least infrequent events. Mainstream convention recognizes the difference between “sudden onset” events such as earthquakes and “slow onset” ones such as drought and some kinds of floods. Nevertheless, disaster is associated firmly in the minds of journalists, donors, policy makers, many development workers and researchers with events. What has still not diffused widely enough is the clear research finding that risk accumulates and that repeated events such as the common sequence of drought and flood erodes livelihood system resilience. Moreover, disaster are in Canadian geographer Ken Hewitt’s words, “pre-figured” by economic, social, and political relations that condemn groups of people to marginality; or, as colleagues and I put it in 1983, “marginal people are pushed into marginal places” be that urban hillside slum or the edge of Kenya’s rangeland.

Delving deeper into the root causes of disaster vulnerability, one cannot fail to grasp that there is connection between production and reproduction in all livelihood systems. By reproduction I mean total social reproduction, and not just the biological reproduction of labor power. These children must learn the complex linguistic and cultural codes that provide the basis for farming, fishing, herding, small scale manufacturing, and trade – what one might call local knowledge. The social networks within which this learning takes place and that assist production must be maintained, just as tools must be maintained. It was observing the break down in transmission of local

---

knowledge caused by the HIV-AIDS pandemic in southern Africa that led Alex de Waal to write of “new variant famine.”

The team that put together the 2006 World Disaster Report set out to explore precisely forms of marginality (ecological, economic, political) and challenges to reproduction in this broad sense that give rise to crises and even disasters that are ignored and neglected. We highlighted hunger in Malawi, unsafe motherhood in Nepal, and gender issues more generally in three of the chapters. Concerning gender the team wrote:

“In a disaster, gender concerns might seem a luxury that can wait while more urgent matters are addressed. Yet the failure to address gender-based inequalities immediately after disaster and throughout the response can condemn women and girls to less aid, fewer life opportunities, ill-health, violence and even death. To reduce future suffering during disasters, aid organizations must ensure full respect for women’s and girls’ human rights – civil, cultural, economic, political and social, including the prevention and prosecution of gender-based violence.”

3. Does the Crisis States Programme Neglect ‘Natural Disasters’?

During my intermittent visits to DESTIN and the CSP over the past few years I have tried to emphasize the importance of environmental stress as another of the important sources of instability in nation states. Chronic and incremental environmental stresses such as climate variability, growing shortage of fresh water, and declining biodiversity, wetland vegetation, etc. as well as acute, episodic stresses such as large earthquakes, floods, droughts interact with political and economic stresses and also sometimes violent conflict. This is not an environmental determinist argument because it is not the natural process or event in itself that created the stress, but the combination of vulnerability on the part of different groups of citizens of the state and the state’s response that determines whether nature will increase or perhaps decrease state fragility.


On the positive side, response that is seen by citizens to be fair and effective may strengthen the credibility and legitimacy of the state. For example, after the Asian tsunami killed 8,000 in Tamil Nadu, India and created widespread homelessness and economic disruption, the central government decided to second district collectors who had had experience dealing with the earthquake in Gujarat four years earlier. This DCs were very active and effective and left a good impression on villages that had never before had direct contact with district government.

State-civil society relations that may have had a history of previous tension may be improved due to working together in the aftermath of a disaster. Some development economists believe that state-civil society synergy is one source of economic growth.

Finally, on the positive side, disaster may provide the catalyst for conflict resolution as in Aceh, Indonesia (but not Sri Lanka) following the Asian tsunami.

On the negative side, conflict over the distribution of recovery assistance may fuel regional discontent and even violent conflict, as in Sri Lanka. Perceptions of a state’s failure to manage a disaster fairly and effectively may contribute to the collapse of its legitimacy and regime change. The Somoza government in Nicaragua fell eventually to the Sandinistas partly because the middle class decided to back the opposition following revelations of gross corruption in the use of 1970 earthquake recovery funds. Some authors believe the beginning of the end of the PRI party’s 70 year hegemony in Mexican politics began with the state’s failure to deal effectively with the Mexico City earthquake in 1985. At a regional scale, the Orissa state government fell in election following the 1999 super cyclone on the east coast of India.

4. Conclusion

Neglect of crises and disasters takes many forms and have a number of contributing causes. Clearly in terms of humanitarian funding, media and diplomatic attention, some conflicts are better attended than others. There is also ebb and flow of attention paid to long running conflicts. Other non-conflictual crises and disasters demonstrate even greater unevenness of attention, and some such as crises in the ability of people to reproduce their
local knowledge, networks, and the resilience of their livelihoods remain invisible.

Since overt violent conflict is one of the characteristics of fragile and crisis states, there is good reason for the CSP to inquire deeper into the variability and unevenness in treatment of different conflicts as policy concerns, uneven media coverage of conflicts, and uneven distribution of humanitarian funding for people caught up in these conflicts.

In addition, extreme natural events that trigger (but do not alone cause) disasters should find a place in the CSPs agenda. The U.N. Secretariat for its International Strategy for Disaster Reduction places heavy emphasis on political will and central planning as one of five pillars for disaster reduction.\textsuperscript{12} Fragile, crisis, and failed states are clearly not likely to implement these roles. The U.N. needs to understand this and modify its program of action accordingly. The CSP can help here.

Furthermore, environmental stresses such as climate variability, water shortage, etc. are bound to increase the pressures on fragile and crisis states, interacting strongly with economic and political stress and even conflict. Well-managed disaster recovery can increase the credibility of the state and contribute to nation building; whilst poorly management disasters can result in eventual regime change.