'Natural' Disasters as Catalysts of Political Action

Mark Pelling, King's College London and

Kathleen Dill, King's College London

Introduction

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the socio-political and cultural dynamics put into motion at the time of catastrophic 'natural' disasters create the conditions for potential political change - often at the hands of a discontented civil society. A state's incapacity to respond adequately to a disaster can create a temporary power vacuum, and potentially a watershed moment in historical trajectories. This generates (albeit temporarily) a window of opportunity for novel socio-political action at local and national levels. Interventions may include manoeuvres to entrench or destabilize current power-holders, change power-sharing relationships within recognized sectors, or to legitimise or de-legitimise new sectors. This briefing note presents initial findings of a study reviewing historical data on the political outcomes of disaster at the level of the nation state and below. It draws on academic papers, practitioner and media reports of large natural disaster events from 1899 to 2005.

Natural Disasters, Development and Security

Renewed interest in the political and economic aspects of disasters triggered by natural phenomena is part of a wider acceptance that development has failed in many parts of the world and that it is development failures that have led to an accumulation of disaster risks.[1] Reflecting this understanding, we situate our analysis of disasters within the wider discourse on human security. Rather than approaching disasters as humanitarian crises, we treat them as the products of maladaption between interlocking socio-environmental relations at local, national,

---

[1] White, P., Pelling, M., Sen, K., Seddon, D., Russell, S., Few, R. (2005) *Disaster Risk Reduction: a development concern* (London: DFID).

international and supranational levels. This reframing raises questions about equity, justice, vulnerability, power relations and whose security is threatened or enhanced by environmental change.[2]

We approach disasters as both political events in and of themselves, and potential producers of secondary political effects (e.g., new alliances, leadership and social critiques). We suggest that a political reading of disaster requires the situating of political action within the wider national and global socio-cultural and historical contexts in which they occur. This supports an analysis of the trajectories of post-disaster popular and elite actions from riots to spontaneous civil society organization, and from states of emergency to martial law. We attempt to assess whether such actions served to entrench or destabilize existing political regimes and/or alternatively, support or curtail subversive and/or novel political action. We compare political outcomes, and assess whether significant patterns arise from within particular state / civil society relationships within the context of international and supranational influences and interventions.

Disasters triggered by environmental phenomena do not *cause* political change, rather they act as catalysts that put into motion *potentially* provocative social processes at multiple social levels. The character of political change is influenced by the nature of the pre-disaster socio-political and cultural milieu, and the actions and reactions of popular and institutional actors involved in disaster response and reconstruction. The analysis is not limited to events associated with party politics, but denotes as 'political' decisions taken and actions carried out to promote particular outcomes affecting the balance of power between social sectors and actors therein.

Seven Hypotheses for Disasters and Political Change

A global security perspective deepens our understanding of a disaster as the product of particular dynamics between socio-political policies (and the cultural milieus in which they obtain meaning) and environmental phenomena. It is necessary to go beyond portraying disasters as discreet, episodic events. Disasters are events occurring in specific socio-ecological zones, where particular types of social organizations flourish, and where particular types of

---

[2] O'Brien, K, (2005) 'Are we missing the point? Global environmental change as an issue of human security', *Global Environmental Change A* (in press).

relationships with external power affect local and national conditions. Seven working hypotheses born out by our survey are discussed below.

Disasters often hit politically peripheral regions hardest catalysing regional political tension. The 23 February 2004 Moroccan earthquake led to a rare display of open dissent with protestors taking to the streets, stopping military and aid convoys and marching to the regional governor's office in north-eastern Morocco to protest the poor response of the government. The demonstrators came from a region with a long history of resistance to a succession of colonial and national rulers with the earthquake having symbolised perceived inequality and partiality in the dominant regime.[3]

Disasters are a product of development policies and can open to scrutiny dominant political and institutional systems. The spectre of a multitude of largely African-American, poor and elderly citizens trapped in New Orleans before catastrophic flooding inundated the city in 2005, combined with the federal government's astonishingly inept response, led to the eruption of a national socio-political crisis. The national crisis (as distinct from the crisis lived by those trapped in the city) was fuelled by the jarring effect that this highly publicized manifestation of race and class discrimination in the United States had on the nation,[4] and was further ignited by the revelation that cronyism within the Bush administration was a clear precursor to disaster.[5]

Existing inequalities can be exacerbated by post-disaster governmental manipulation. Political conflict following disaster often manifests around attempts to re-distribute titles or usefactory rights to land. It is commonplace for developers and speculators to claim rights over low-income settlement space (assessed by government agents as too dangerous for further habitation) with the effect that land is transferred from low to high-income groups. A recent example comes from Lago de Apoyo, where reconstruction following an earthquake led to the relocation of labourers and the expansion of a luxury lakeside hotel.[6] At a larger scale, the transfer of coastal land from

---

[3] *African Research Bulletin*, 41(2), February 1-29, 2004, Published March 25, 2004.
[4] Frymer, Paul, Dara Z.Strolovitch and Dorian T. Warren, 'Katrina's Political Roots and Division: Race, Class and Federalism in American Politics', in *Understanding Katrina: Perspectives from the Social Sciences* (Social Science Research Council) September 28, 2005, http://understandingkatrina.ssrc.org/
[5] Elliston, Jon, 'Disaster in the Making', *Independent Weekly*, September 22, 2004.
[6] Professor Michael Redclift, King's College London, personal communication, 2005

village to commercial use in Indonesia and Sri Lanka following the Indian Ocean Tsunami is also well recognised and a source of local political tension.[7]

The way in which the state and other sectors act in response and recovery is largely predicated on the kind of political relationships that existed between sectors before the crisis. The relationship between political regime form and disaster risk is complex. Amarta Sen[8] famously observed that in democracies, a free press reduces famine risk (and its attendant instability) through holding government accountable. In polities without a free press other mechanisms can operate to reduce disaster risk (and potential political instability). Cuba has an international reputation for efficient disaster evacuation[9] drawing on highly effective social mobilisation. This suggests that political commitment to risk reduction, rather than the level of regime authoritarianism, may be a better indicator of how successful a particular state will be in its approach to disaster reduction and response.

Regimes are likely to interpret spontaneous collective actions by non-government sectors in the aftermath of a disaster as a threat and respond with repression. There is a host of data on authoritarian and democratic regimes to support this hypothesis. Following the 1976 earthquake in Guatemala, the military dictatorship focussed rehabilitation on the capital city, ignoring severely damaged rural Maya communities. Abandoned by the state, local organisations adapted to new community needs and continued working past the search and rescue phase to co-ordinate re-building. The government perceived emerging local Maya leaders as a political threat and violently repressed them. Though accomplished without bloodshed, the democratically elected Turkish government also repressed civil society organizations activated during a disaster. In this case, the state proved incapable of providing assistance during the critical first days following the 1999 Marmara earthquake and local associations and NGOs stepped in to fill this gap. To regain control, the government froze NGO bank accounts and proclaimed illegal all but select state-authorized NGO activities. The repression was focussed especially against organisations identifying with a religious, Islamic orientation. These examples also point to the need to explain

---

[7] Ian Christoplos, Glemminge Development Research AB personal communication, 2005.
[8] Sen, Amarta and J.H. Dreze (1999) 'Democracy as a Universal Value', *Journal of Democracy* 10, pp.3-17.
[9] Thomson, Martha and Izaskun Gaviria (2004) *Weathering the Storm: Lessons in Risk Reduction from Cuba* (Boston: Oxfam America).

national political action following disaster within the international political context. Repression in Guatemala unfolded in a Cold War client state. Turkey is caught between the external pressures of EU candidacy and US strategic interests, which magnify internal struggles between political, religious and ethnic groups.

In the aftermath of disaster, political leaders may regain or even enhance their popular legitimacy. This hypothesis is exemplified by political responses to a 1966 hurricane in the city of New Orleans[10] and at a larger scale with events surrounding the 1976 Tangshan earthquake in China.[11] In the former case, an incumbent mayor used disaster relief to bolster his public image and was re-elected to office a month later despite being personally responsible for the reallocation of city funds originally destined to shore up the levee. The latter took place in China during a period of enormous political upheaval largely due to the death of Mao Zedong. Mao's successor, Hua Guofeng expertly portrayed the Tangshan earthquake as a culturally symbolic event revealing social imbalance and portending great change. He appropriated the disaster as a site from which to introduce a new leadership, and successfully dismantled the opposing power base controlled by the 'Gang of Four'. Once again, the nature of the regime (democratic/authoritarian) does not appear to affect this pattern. What these two cases have in common is leaders who successfully manipulated disaster events to maintain or elevate their popular legitimacy within a specific political institutional architecture.

The repositioning of political actors in the aftermath of a disaster unfolds at multiple scales. Local, as well as national political actors, use disaster relief and recovery to extend their influence over development policies and programmes. In Central America local NGOs stepped into the new political space created in the aftermath of the 1988 Hurricane Mitch, while strengthening regional alliances.[12] Such influence may be temporary, lasting only as long as the relief or reconstruction periods, but can potentially lead to a long-term influence and involvement in development planning and thus access to political power. Following the 1985

---

[10] Abney, G. and L. Hill (1966) 'Natural Disasters as a Political Variable: The Effect of a Hurricane on an Urban Election, *American Political Science Review* 60(4), pp.974-81.

[11] Chen, B. (2004) 'Resist the Earthquake and Rescue Ourselves', in L. Vale and T, Campanella (eds.) *The Resilient City: How Modern Cities Recover From Disaster* (New York: Oxford University Press).

[12] Wooster, M., Demeritt, D., Dill, K., Webley, P., (2005) *Enhancing Volcanic Hazard Avoidance Capacity in Central America through Local Remote Sensing and Improved Risk Communication* (London: DFID).

Mexico City earthquake, several prominent activists involved in reconstruction efforts entered city and nationwide politics, the structure of city government was reconstituted, and the ruling party lost its 70-year hold on the capital city.[13]

Conclusion

Perhaps surprisingly, there are similarities in the ways in which democratic and authoritarian regimes respond to disaster. Political leaders in both systems manipulate disaster recovery to enhance their popular legitimacy. Disasters also open political systems up to scrutiny. In this way events can become symbolically important for politically marginalized groups and can catalyse political organising and dissent, examples of this process include class and cast based, and regional protest. Political manipulation and protest occur at local, municipal and national scales.

Political responses are largely determined by pre-disaster social contracts. Suppressed values and associated forms of organisation can re-emerge, or predominant institutions can become further entrenched. In reconstruction, power asymmetries can lead to the manipulation of aid and subsequently the distribution of economic power. Where new forms of organisation become too effective, they may be perceived as a challenge to the state. It is here that democratic and authoritarian regimes tend to differ in their strategies for survival. The international community has a role to play in setting the incentive structures which states consider when weighing up the comparative risks of internal dissent and international discredit.

---

[13] San Juan Victoria, Carlos (2000) *Mexico City, Institutions and Civil Society 1998-1999: Experiences of a City in Transition', Civil Society and Governability in Mexico* (Mexico City: Ford Foundation and the University of Veracruz).