

The Whole World is Watching?

Some thoughts on ‘neglected’ disasters

Article commissioned for World Vision International’s
Global Future

Ben Wisner
bwisner@igc.org

7 May 2008

“The whole world is watching!” protesters chanted nearly forty years ago as Chicago police rioted and indiscriminately beat bystanders and war protesters alike at the U.S. Democratic convention. The reference was to world wide T.V. coverage of the convention. Advances in communications technology since then allow a billion people witness outrages, atrocities, and also the aftermath of natural hazard events. With such massive connectivity among humans and their institutions on planet earth, why are some disasters neglected?

Why is so little attention given to the on-going humanitarian disasters in Congo, Chechnya, and Haiti while there are massive citizen movements focused on Darfur? Why did the international community pour vast resources into Asian tsunami and Kashmir earthquake relief and recovery, but much less to deal with drought and threatened famine in Africa at the same time?

A superficial answer is that the sheer magnitude of events that compete for attention makes choice and discrimination necessary. For example, UNICEF responds to around 270 emergencies in 90 countries each year.

As I write, a major information clearing house for humanitarian emergencies, ReliefWeb (<http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/dbc.nsf/doc100?OpenForm>) lists situations demanding attention in 18 countries. At the same time that media attention is focused on the cyclone in Burma, people are also recovering from a typhoon in China and cyclone in southern Brazil. The crisis of rising food prices is worsening the situation of people multiply-stressed in Somalia, Afghanistan, and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The same is happening in Kenya, where those displaced by violence try to go home and Uganda, where civil war orphans are reported to be “forgotten.” Chad, Burundi, and Central African Republic are also highlighted on the ReliefWeb home page, as are Iraq, and Haiti. A volcano has caused the evacuation of city in southern Chile, and while Thailand mobilizes to help people in neighboring Burma, it confronts flooding at home.

And that is just on the home page. If one clicks on a region, the Americas, for example, one finds that Peru, Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador are still recovering from floods, along with Mexico and Costa Rica. Civil war grinds on in Colombia with huge displacements of rural people.

So clearly there is a tremendous amount of crisis in the world today, and the media, donors, diplomats, and humanitarian agencies have to make choices. That is one answer, and it is not wrong. But it only displaces the question. How are priorities set? We are still left with the question why some disasters get lots of attention and some less or even none.

Before returning to the “why” question, it’s necessary to ask some others: What’s being neglected? By whom? And When?

What’s Neglected?

Without going into an academic discussion along the lines of “What is a disaster,” a few common sense distinctions need to be made. Magnitude has something to do with the degree of attention and assistance given to a situation that demands more than local, sub-national, or national resources and capacities. The Asian tsunami, Kashmir earthquake, cyclone in Burma clearly fall into that category. This afternoon more information coming out of the delta region of the Irrawaddy River in Burma suggest the death toll from cyclone Nargis could be as high as 100,000.



Irrawaddy Delta area in Burma before (top) and after cyclone Nargis.

Source: NASA satellite imagery accessed via BBC

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7387331.stm>

At the other extreme, researchers in Latin America have used a data base called *DesInventar* to catalog for Colombia alone more than 19,000 small and moderate events that took lives, destroyed assets and infrastructure of the period 1971-2002 (<http://www.desinventar.org/>). The total loss in financial terms was greater than all of the high profile disasters to affect that country taken together, including the deadly eruption of Nevado del Ruiz in 1985. The best known international data base, EM-DAT, records only 97 disasters in Colombia for that period. Few of these 19,000 small and moderate events made it into the national press in Colombia, yet alone world media.

There also seems to be a bias in the media toward the drama of sudden onset disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, coastal storms, and large rapidly rising

flood waters. Slow onset and pervasive disasters such as drought, desertification, coastal erosion, collapse of fisheries are harder to follow from a journalistic point of view, but the livelihoods and life changes of millions are at stake.

Civil war is a more dramatic story than the daily violence enacted by organized crime that traffics in women and children. An outbreak of Ebola virus is more likely to get attention than chronic high mortality among Nepalese women and children. Each year in China's small and poorly regulated coal mines at least as many miners die as the number who perished in the World Trade Towers. The World Health Organization estimates that each year the lives of tens of thousands of people are cut short because of urban air pollution.

Thus the "what" question helps, but does not tell the whole story.

Neglected By Whom?

In considering neglect of some disasters, we also have to ask, "neglect by whom." I have already mentioned the media. But what is "the media?" Despite growing concentration in some areas, there is great diversity in the communications industry. There are large news services that come to mind and established brands with global reach such as BBC and CNN. Yet along side there is also Al Jazeera and Al Jazeera English (<http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/55ABE840-AC30-41D2-BDC9-06BBE2A36665.htm>) as well as many internet based news services such as AlertNet (www.alertnet.org), the web sites of hundreds of non-governmental agencies and specialized lobbies, support networks, and research institutions. Also, a good deal of news is transmitted, analyzed and debated by non-professionals on thousands of blogs.

Donors are another group that prioritize among disasters. Within the last few years there have been efforts to come up with common assistance criteria and standards under such terms as "good donorship" and some very successful attempts to do common evaluation of humanitarian action (see the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action -- ALNAP -- <http://www.alnap.org/>). However national government donors make their decisions based on national interest whether they say so or not. Is it a coincidence that Burma is resource rich and is receiving a lot of attention while hundreds of thousands of North Koreans have starved over the past decade in a resource poor country with little attention from the outside? Both countries are highly secretive, closed societies. So they make an informative matched pair from the point of view of "disaster diplomacy" (see an excellent web site devoted to disaster diplomacy <http://www.disasterdiplomacy.org/>).

Neglected When?

Timing plays a big role in two ways. Several large and equally compelling humanitarian disasters taking place at the same time may end up with one casting the others in its shadow. The Asian tsunami had that effect on the growing famine conditions in Niger, West Africa, for example. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita placed Stan and the death and

destruction it produced in Guatemala also second place from the point of view of attention it received.

The second temporal issue is duration. The media and the public tire eventually of telling and hearing the “same” story. Donors and NGOs are concerned with budget cycles, log frame results, and exit strategies. Some humanitarian emergencies seem never-ending: violence, rape, displacement and disease in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the civil war in Colombia, the combination in Haiti of violence, misrule, environmental degradation, poverty, floods and landslides. Some seem to recur every few years: cycles of flood, drought and food emergency in much of southern Africa, for example. Still others have no clear “end” point.

Recovery is a common word, but as a process, it is very poorly understood. When will New Orleans or the city of Bam in Iran that suffered a huge earthquake in 2003 “recover”? In the sense of rebuilding, it’s possible to identify a time scale. But full economic, environmental, cultural, and psycho-social recovery takes longer, are variable, and in some cases may never happen. The cameras and most of the aid workers have left a long time before any of this takes place.

Why Neglected?

We come back to the question, “why.” There is no one reason. There is some self interest among NGOs at work, perhaps even some cherry picking where it is easier to get attention for their good efforts and thus more support for it. Or more charitably, I might say that NGOs often find it easiest to work where they have people on the ground, some history, or good partners. National interest is also at work to some degree. The U.S. was keen to send aid to Pakistan and Indonesia as a way of diluting its image in the Islamic world as born again Crusaders and unilateralist warriors. That is not to say that the humanitarian ethic is a sham. It has existed since the Enlightenment in tension with political and economic self interest. The current spate of publications about “disaster capitalism” do not deny the legitimacy of an ethic based on universality, humanity, and neutrality, but show how such principles and their application navigate a the neo-liberal world of self interest and markets.

Other disasters are neglected because they are misunderstood. If donors, NGOs, the media, and the public understood the full cost in social and economic terms of the small and moderate events that punctuate the lives of the poor and marginal around the world, more attention would be paid to them. The term “climate refugee” is confusing and dangerous in some ways. Yet people whose lives are chronically unstable because of the occurrence of many small and moderate hazard events are less likely to adapt to climate change in place. They may indeed become “climate refugees.” They are already the ones most likely to end up in poor (and dangerous) parts of growing cities – even before the most severe impacts of climate change.

Some disasters fall between stools, are misclassified, or just not counted. One example is the illegal dumping of a whole cargo boat load of hazardous waste in the suburbs of

Abidjan, Ivory Coast in 2006

(<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/02/world/africa/02ivory.html>). Thousands of people became ill. This was a huge disaster that nearly toppled the government. However, it was not seen as a “natural” disaster or “technological” disaster like Bhopal. Very little follow up has been done by media or development organizations. What has happened to the people who became ill? Are there chronic effects? Are they working? Are their families coping? Are their children in school?

As the 21st Century proceeds, it is very likely that we will see more and more of this kind of hybrid disaster – combinations of the many effects of climate change, rapid urbanization, organized criminality (and what else is illegal dumping?), and conflict.

Yes, the whole world is watching – or at least a very considerable and growing part of it – but watching is not enough. Media, donors, NGOs, and the public need to learn to focus and to understand the hidden connections among what conventionally have been called “accidents” or – even worse – “acts of God.”

Further Reading

Antonio Donini, “Through a Glass Darkly: Humanitarianism and Empire,” in N. Gunewardena and M. Schuller, eds., *Capitalizing on Catastrophe: Neo-Liberal Strategies in Disaster Recovery*, pp. 29-46. Lanham, MD: Alta Mira Press, 2008.

Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007.

Ben Wisner, Allan Lavell, and Jonathan Walter, “Neglected crises: partial response perpetuates suffering.” *World Disaster Report 2006*. Geneva: IFRC, 2006 (<http://www.ifrc.org/publicat/wdr2006/summaries.asp>).

Ben Wisner and Peter Walker, “Getting Tsunami Recovery and Early Warning Right.” *Open House International*, April, 2005
<http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/apcity/unpan022459.pdf> .