

Disaster risk governance – solution or driver of vulnerability

COVID-19 has as of mid-November 2020 has infected over 57 million people resulting in over 1.36 million deaths worldwide [1]. The impacts on human lives and well-being are and will be compounded by the socio-economic consequences of the responses to the pandemic emergency adopted by so many countries. None will feel this more acutely than the most vulnerable. The World Bank estimated in June 2020 that the outbreaks may persist longer than expected, and lockdown measures be maintained or reintroduced; up to 100 million people could be pushed into extreme poverty [2]. This is to say nothing of the potential impacts of second and third wave infections and the pre-emptive and responsive measures that countries adopt to manage this biorisk.

The ramifications for progress in achieving the sustainable development goals (SDGs) are dire. Progress achieved to date is expected to regress, a pattern that is expected to be replicated in the Paris Agreement and in efforts to achieve goal, outcome and global targets of the Sendai Framework. National priorities emphasise saving lives, anticipating subsequent waves of infections and providing economic stimulus packages; often at the expense of building long-term resilience or addressing underlying vulnerabilities.

But decoupling the response to the pandemic from addressing underlying root causes and vulnerabilities (indeed delinking the response from the SDGs), risks rebuilding or allowing the very same conditions that gave rise to the pandemic outbreak in the first place and allowed it to persist and propagate. Rebuilding the same systems will have predictably similar outcomes. Likewise the inverse; nor can the SDGs be decoupled from appropriate disaster risk governance and reduction if we want to create risk-resilient development pathways. It is only in establishing the system of institutions, mechanisms, policy and legal frameworks and other arrangements to guide, coordinate and oversee disaster risk reduction and related areas of policy to redress the underlying drivers of risk – many of which are enshrined in the 2030 Agenda – will the global goals be achieved and more resilient societies developed. Societies that have the ability to anticipate and prevent, as well as manage systemic risks and the catastrophic mega events that materialise when such risks are realised.

COVID-19 has dispersed the clouds obscuring systemic vulnerabilities (as represented in Figure 1). Chronic poverty, limited access to health care systems, limited access to safe drinking water, lack of hygienic conditions and dependency on place-based livelihoods are putting the most vulnerable people at higher risk of contracting the disease. Worse, the most vulnerable are disproportionally affected by both the health and the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic, as well as the responses adopted by governments. This is not a reality restricted to pandemics, but a tangible demonstration of the centrality of vulnerability to all risk.

To build resilient communities, a deep understanding of the conditions of vulnerability is required. An understanding that must contribute to the shaping of risk governance arrangements is to be adopted within efforts pursuing sustainable development. Vulnerability insights can add immeasurable value to the policy dialogue, shed light on policy gaps within and across countries and households and assure pertinence in actions taken. Failure to consider such vulnerabilities can result in institutions, mechanisms, policy and legal frameworks, and other risk governance arrangements that are not fit for purpose and which consequently fail to provide the enabling environment for, nor adopt the measures to, reduce the risk of the most vulnerable populations; potentially with fatal consequences. Worse, such *vulnerability myopia* can result in approaches that can even exacerbate vulnerabilities, increasing risk.



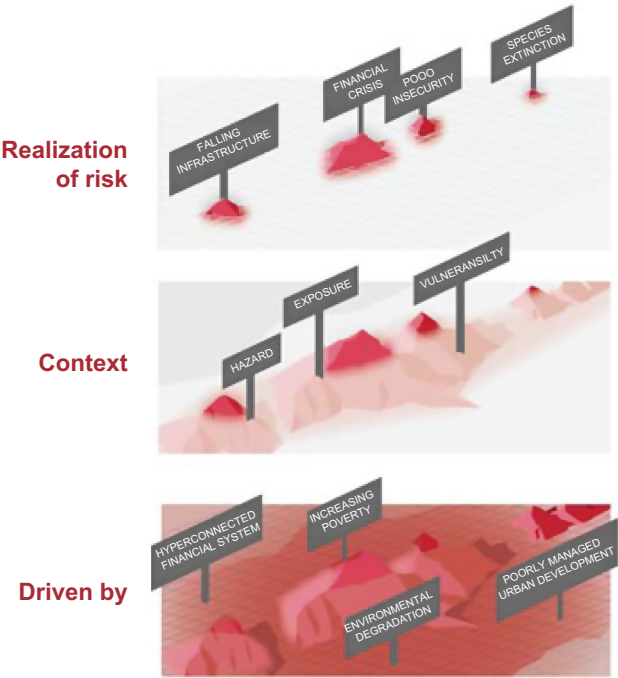


Figure 1.

Vulnerable populations are often identified with high risk. However, risk is not a defining characteristic of the situation. The simple characteristic of being a child or disabled or of a particular caste or economic group does not define the vulnerability. Vulnerability must be thought of in terms of vulnerability to something. It is true that in many cases, realized risks may have contributed to their destitution, as their opportunities to cope with those risks were limited [3].

Risk, impact and capacity to cope evolve throughout a person's life cycle. Vulnerabilities may emerge and change, compound and persist over long periods – leading to disparities in income, inequality based on gender, ethnicity, household and social status. This can contribute to the intergenerational transmission of vulnerability and widening inequalities. Although vulnerability is not a function of poverty alone, disasters magnify existing social inequalities and further disadvantage those who are already vulnerable [3].

Changes in forms of risk governance and collaboration may offer solutions to some of the problems related to understanding and managing risk within sustainable development efforts. However, to better understand vulnerabilities, we need systematic effort and sustained funding for integrated risk assessment and disaggregated data collection. Disaggregated data (e.g. by sex, age, disability, ethnicity, income or geographic location) can be an enabler, revealing the differential impacts and experiences of people in disasters. Accessing such information involves harnessing data across different domains, global frameworks and indicators that can allow comparison of outcomes and changes over time – among and within countries and households – and to ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable populations are not ignored.

Having good data on the coping mechanisms available to different classes of vulnerable people can assist governments in assuring a more equitable distribution of public resources for social safety programming or to target development partner programming. The mutual

and compounding value of fulfilling this simple act of governance in a systematic and thorough way unlocks resilience [3].

This special issue reprises the analysis of the relationships between vulnerability and risk governance presented in the UN Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction 2019 (GAR 2019) [3]. It features 11 of the contributing papers produced for GAR 2019. The impact of disasters encompasses more than just affected people or economic losses. While every society is vulnerable to risk, some suffer significantly more and recover more slowly than others when adversity strikes.

As we continue to learn about the genesis, propagation and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated responses by countries, the first paper in the special issue examines vulnerability to another health hazard that could equally have become a global pandemic. It analyses the correlation between poverty eradication and Ebola control strategies and stresses the need to focus on health literacy and education to basic preventive measures which are needed for self-care, disease management and response.

The second paper provides the theoretical frame of the special issue, as it examines how to strengthen risk-informed decision-making as an essential part of risk governance, to reach positive scenarios for human vulnerability and exposure to extreme events.

The special issue then outlines factors contributing to community level vulnerability in various regional and cultural settings; the third paper presents a methodology for vulnerability assessment in local communities in Chile; the fourth examines the relationship between government discourse and vulnerability in Davao del Norte Province in the Philippines and the fifth paper examines institutional vulnerability assessment as part of risk governance in the municipality of Jaboaão dos Guararapes in Brazil.

With an eye to urban vulnerability, the special issue then examines: urban development and disaster risk reduction in informal settlements in Latin America and the Caribbean in the sixth paper; fire risk reduction on the margins of an urbanizing world and through the case of Delhi, India the seventh paper explores multi-sector exposure and vulnerability to climate change in mega cities.

The special issue concludes with an investigation of the solution space. Paper nine features the Japanese experience in disaster preparedness in complex adaptive systems through government-led continuity planning for a self-organizing community. The tenth paper showcases the multiscale and multilevel holistic approach in downscaling local resilience and sustainable development employed by the province of Potenza, Italy. The final paper provides a case study of the successful mainstreaming of disaster risk management into sub-national and local development policies in south eastern Mexico.

The special issue underlines the import of understanding how life circumstances affect individuals' likelihood of being healthy and educated, accessing basic services, leading a dignified life and withstanding or rebounding stronger from shocks. This implies sound socio-economic management that is more fair, inclusive and equitable and that is underpinned by a systemic, multidimensional understanding of vulnerability (including inequalities and disparities in shared prosperity as the world grows wealthier). Investing in human capital to enable risk-informed choices and empowering the vulnerable as the drivers of change is a no-regrets undertaking. Identifying gaps and more comprehensively reflecting the conditions in which risk accumulates and is realized, facilitates appropriate and timely policy interventions that prioritize prospective and corrective risk management above compensatory risk management [3].

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Notes

1. Confirmed Cases and Global Deaths as of 20 November, 2020 from <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>
2. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/updated-estimates-impact-covid-19-global-poverty>
3. UNDRR (2019), UN Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction, Geneva, Switzerland, United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) <https://gar.undrr.org/>

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