

## Addressing the cultural gap between humanitarian assistance and local responses to risk through a place-based approach

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*Cultural differences between international organizations engaged in disaster risk reduction (DRR) and communities at risk can create and perpetuate social vulnerability to disasters. In this brief, we propose a place-based approach to address the gap between contemporary DRR efforts and local cultural interpretations and responses to risks in order to develop context-specific and more effective risk reduction strategies.*

### Introduction

Despite decades of international humanitarian efforts to reduce risk and build resilience, disasters and climate-related risks are rising. Recent international fora including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (ASD) and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction have explicitly recognized that the drivers of disaster risk need to be addressed in innovative and people-focused ways if DRR efforts are to be meaningful.

Recent research has recognized culture as a determinant of vulnerability and an important factor in DRR (Thomalla et al. 2015; Hoffman 2015; IFRC 2014). In light of this, a more holistic, “people-centered” approach, acknowledging the significance of “cultural diversity” (United Nations 2015, para.36) and a “cultural perspective” (UNISDR 2015a, p.8) has been put forth. However, these references to culture are vague, making the integration of culture difficult to operationalize in diverse local contexts.

### The burgeoning humanitarian assistance community: Increasing costs and growing risks

Climate change is exacerbating human vulnerability to disasters (UNISDR 2015a) during an era of unprecedented socio-economic and population growth, urbanization, and environmental change (Steffen et al. 2004). As risks increase, the scope of engagement for international actors has expanded. The DRR, development and humanitarian aid scene has burgeoned (Donini 2010), with a global estimate of \$3 trillion in aid in the past two decades (Kellet & Caravani 2013). This scene is also becoming increasingly diverse as a range of new actors, including the private sector, join the field. The motivation and values of actors can greatly vary, for example, they may be tied to protecting financial investments (UNISDR 2013). The growth and diversification of the international aid community has resulted in organizational culture clashes, fragmentation, and a concerning disconnect from on-the-ground realities (Alexander 2006; Bello 2006; Calhoun 2004). Furthermore, the growing recognition that disasters are driven by poor development choices (Lavell & Maskrey 2013) opens the argument that the international

community has contributed to risk creation through investment decisions and by implementing DRR measures that reinforce unsustainable development pathways (UNISDR 2015b).

While the ASD and the Sendai Framework suggest more holistic and collaborative efforts, putting these agendas into practice in diverse local contexts will be challenging. Effectively reducing risks requires a culturally nuanced understanding of why individuals, communities, and organizations make certain decisions in regards to risk, and this must be reflected in DRR frameworks and operational agendas.

### **Culturally embedded interpretations and responses to risk**

Culture includes, *inter alia*, beliefs, values, and attitudes regarding what actions people should take to risks (IFRC 2014; Schipper & Dekens 2009). The cultural mediation of disaster risk is often closely tied with place-specific historical trajectories that encompass trans-generational social memories of past disasters (Dyer 2009). Over time, culturally embedded responses to risk and disasters emerge which are shaped by people's culturally-influenced environmental perceptions, religious views, and land-use management practices (Renaud et al. 2013; Collins et al. 2015; Dyer 2009).

Culture is fluid (Eiser et al. 2012) and thus culturally embedded risk responses are continually evolving. The capacity to engage in these responses is founded in the natural, human, social, physical, and financial capitals (Gunderson & Holling 2002; Scoones 1998) that can be accessed within a place. It can be argued therefore that responses to risk reflect the dynamic resilience of the human-environment

system, i.e. its ability to absorb disturbance and return to stable functioning (Folke et al. 2010).

Importantly, a place can consist of a conglomeration of cultural groups, each with varying access to available capital and different historical human-environment relationships. These groups vary in cultural identity and practices, each of which contributes to overall levels of vulnerability and resilience (Gallopín 2006). By not recognizing these often invisible practices, interventions may miss the underlying causes of vulnerability tied to these cultural elements (Mercer et al. 2012).

### **Power and bias: The interactions between the cultures of humanitarian organizations and local communities**

Culturally embedded interpretations of and responses to risk are also present among aid organizations. Disaster aid is increasingly globalized, bringing together multiple actors whose perceptions, priorities, and modes of working have developed in different cultural contexts (Hewitt 2012). While this doesn't automatically present a conflict, the convergence of multiple cultural responses to risk formed in distinctly different contexts can lead to misunderstanding, compromising the effectiveness of DRR efforts.

Communities in developing countries are often perceived by aid organizations as clinging to antiquated, religious, or fatalistic beliefs about hazards (Becker et al. 2008; Eiser et al. 2012). This is viewed unfavorably when contrasted with the technocratic, 'expert'-driven cultures of humanitarian organizations that are typically informed by scientific knowledge. The recurrent 'local versus scientific knowledge' debate (Nygren 1999) opens up deeper issues of

identity and power when placed in the context of culture and disasters. Power imbalances exist between international organizations and local communities (Citraningtyas et al. 2010). External actors may project their cultural biases on communities and bypass existing social arrangements, distributing aid in a way that is inequitable and culturally irrelevant (Kruks-Wisner 2010). This can cause new power dynamics and favoritism to emerge within the community (Daly 2014), and reinforce existing inequalities, for example, related to gender, ethnicity, or disability (Kruks-Wisner 2010).

'Culture' is often perceived as a marker of 'otherness' (Hewitt 2012) and this narrow conceptual understanding can be used by outside actors to distance themselves from culture altogether. International experts often perceive their disaster risk knowledge as 'unbiased' and 'non-cultural', failing to recognize that their own culture has influenced their understanding of risk and framed their current *modus operandi* (IFRC 2014). These actors are significantly shaped by their prevailing organizational cultures, which include organization-specific power structures and donor-driven priorities (Donini 2010).

### **A place-based approach to connect humanitarian disaster assistance with local responses to risk**

People's perceptions of risk are tied to culture, reflecting complex belief and value systems that shape responses to both risk and aid. Integrating culture in DRR is challenging because culture is dynamic, sensitive, difficult to define, and often intangible. Nevertheless, this cultural knowledge needs to be better reflected in DRR policy and practice if disaster risks are to be reduced or better managed. We

argue that social science, specifically place-based research, can help address the current 'culture' gap in DRR efforts driven by the largely technocratic organizational culture of aid organizations.

Sense of place (and place-based) research explores the emotional attachments people create with the biophysical places they inhabit, including place-influenced individual and group identity (e.g. feelings of belonging and purpose), and the meanings associated with that (Stedman 2003; Sampson & Goodrich 2009). By incorporating social and cultural memory, it captures historical attachments and identities along with the physical spaces linked to them, e.g. a sacred forest grove (Santos-Granero 1998). These attachments to place, when threatened (e.g. by extreme events) can motivate action (Devine-Wright 2013; Lewicka 2011; Davenport & Anderson 2005) toward adaptation or risk reduction (Fresque-Baxter & Armitage 2012). By understanding the place-based cultural values, including local and indigenous knowledge (Adger et al. 2011) that can drive change within a community, external actors can develop strategies that are more aligned with sociocultural priorities and practices.

### **Conclusions**

To ensure the success of the ASD and SFDRR, tools and frameworks must be developed that equitably reflect diverse culturally-influenced understandings of risk. Without an engagement with culture, the implementation of culturally-mismatched DRR and development plans will result in both wasted resources and increased risk.

A place-based framework offers an entry point into culture as it brings insights on the context-specific meanings and attachments of different actors, which can motivate their behavior, including when facing risk. International organizations need to develop a more nuanced, place-specific understanding of the culture(s) they work with, and critically reflect on their own organizational culture, to more aptly understand various perspectives, values, and motivations that shape decision-making processes in times of uncertainty. One potential way forward is to build and strengthen research on place-specific risk perceptions in order to develop context-appropriate guidelines for humanitarian organizations engaged with DRR in different cultural settings. With a place-based approach, the inherent tension that accompanies cultural intersections is more likely resolved (Chapin & Knapp 2015), and diversity, a keystone of resilience, is promoted (Folke 2006). This allows for the co-creation of processes and knowledge by both internal and external actors, providing a space for mutual learning on novel and culturally-viable approaches towards risk reduction and equitable, sustainable and resilient development.

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